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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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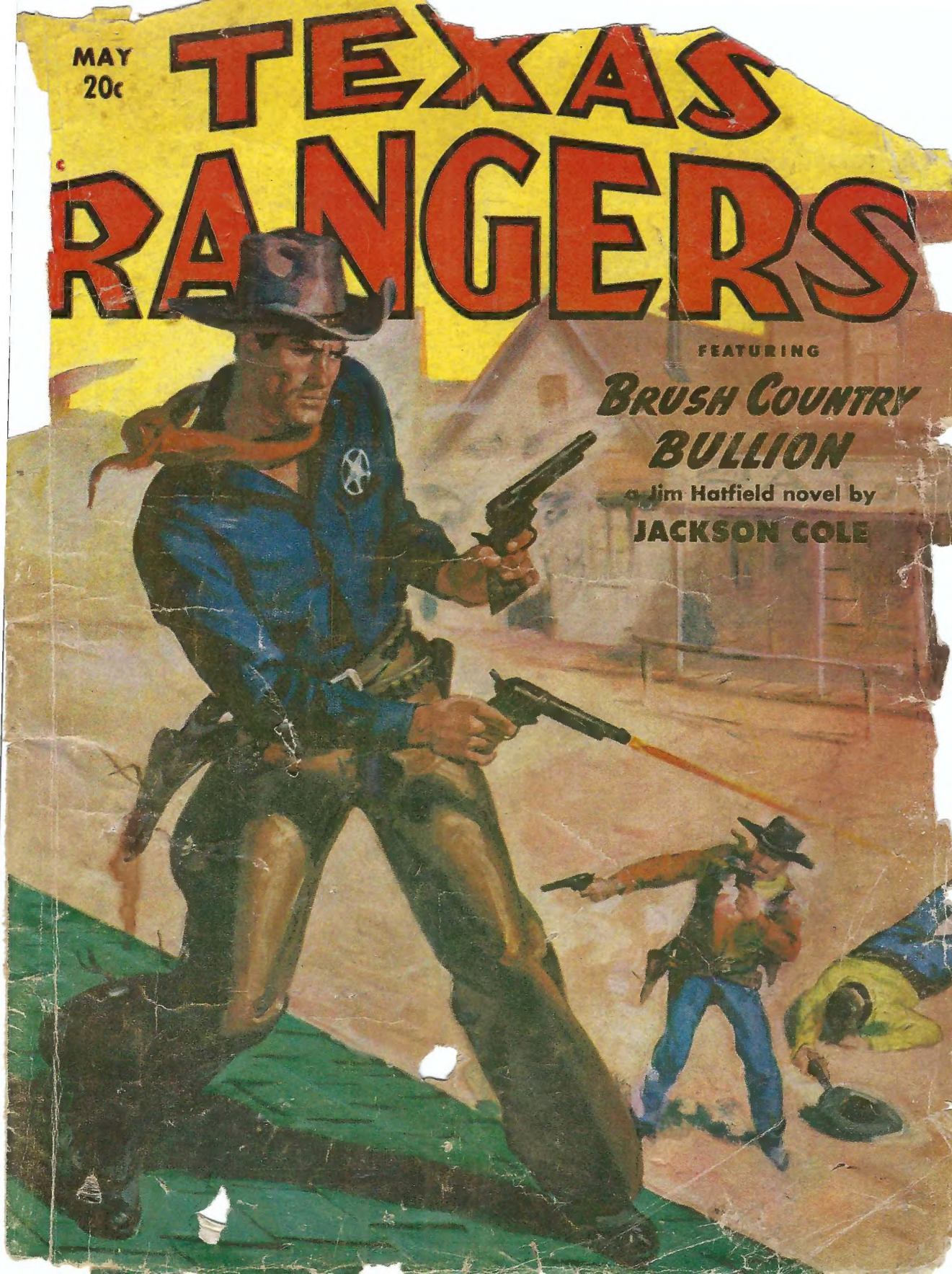
FEATURING

BRUSH COUNTRY BULLION

a Jim Hatfield novel by

JACKSON COLE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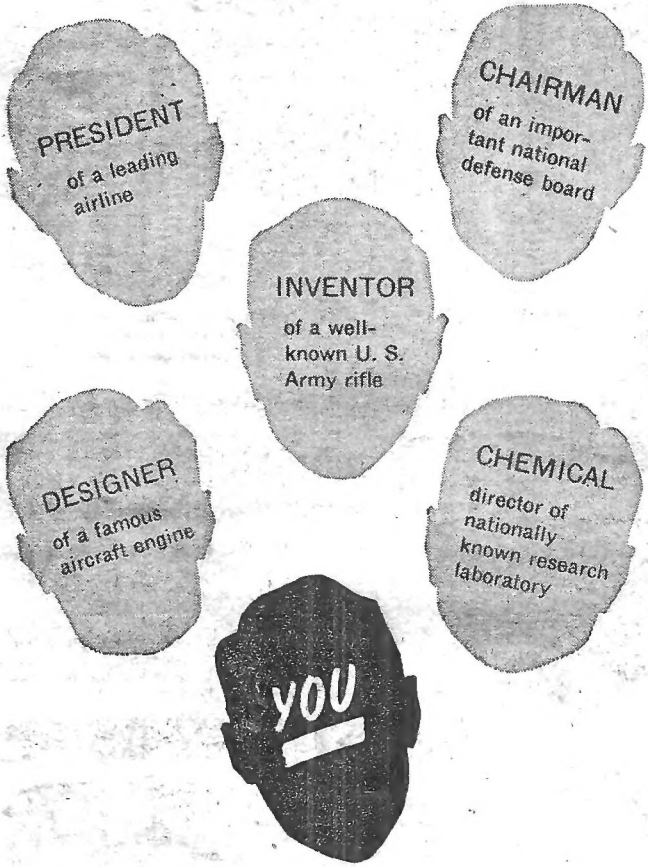

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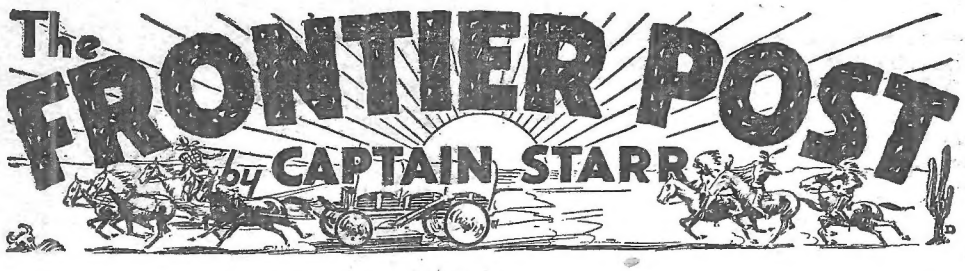

Where yesterday's West meets today

OLD MARK TWAIN was wrong when he made that famous remark about the weather. Nowadays we are doing something about it, with this new-fangled science of rainmaking.

Rainmaking isn't news but what is news is that it has passed from the experimental stage to a sure bet. Anyhow, that's what a big shot weatherman told a Western livestock convention recently. He claimed every job of "cloud seeding" boosts rainfall from 50% to 500% and not one project has failed.

This weatherman, who has the mighty appropriate name of Dr. Irving P. Krick (pronounced creek) paints an exciting picture of the future of rainmaking. It will transform the climate of the whole world. It will do away with ruinous droughts and make food so plentiful that famines will end forever. Just by sprinkling dry ice, or silver iodide, on passing clouds, beef production on Western ranges can be increased by half.

In New Mexico last summer drought-wilted ranges turned green in 30 days with rains valued at 40 million dollars. In the Horse Heaven region of southeastern Washington wheat yields were doubled. Farm incomes in three eastern Oregon counties will jump six million dollars on account of milking clouds last winter.

This Doc Krick is the boss-man of a rainmaking outfit called the Water Resources Development Corporation. Up until lately I've been mighty skeptical about the claims made by him and others in the same business. But a little while back I had a wet personal experience that convinced me plenty.

I was on a little pasear through Santa Ana Canyon, which is a hunk of desertlike country just outside the smog belt of southern California. There came along a handful of clouds that didn't look like much, which might be expected to produce a little sprinkle, nothing more.

But all at once they cut loose. For about three hours one of the heaviest rains I ever did see pounded down, so hard I just about couldn't see to travel. I got all set to hear news about big, destructive floods.

Suddenly I came out of it, under a blue sky, where nary a drop had fallen. Later I learned that I'd got under a flying rainmaker, who flew about the same direction as I travelled. He'd contracted to souse those parts and he sure enough did. No rain to speak of fell outside his zone of operations.

A few months before, I was told at a nearby mountain locality, a single cloud-busting airplane had pulled the sensational stunt of putting out a serious forest fire.

So there you are, folks. Doc Krick declares he can change the dry and dusty desert into a garden of Eden for a few dollars. But I don't think that all desert folks hanker to be fixed up with a job of artificial nucleation, which is the fancy word for rainmaking. A heap of 'em came to the desert places because they were hot and dry and healthful. They don't hanker for any change.

Here's another thing that may prove to be a serious drawback. The general belief is that there is only so much rain up there in the sky, just enough to go around and hardly that. If one part of the country grabs off more than its natural share, it well could be at the expense of some other part. That argument came up couple years back when Nevada ranchers bought themselves a big rain, soon followed by a flock of complaints from Utah and Colorado, since storms move from west to east there, and they figured they'd been cheated. (I told you all about it at the time.) But since nobody could actually prove the claim, nothing came of it except name calling and hard feelings.

It reminds me of old Caleb Westover, who was just about the worst cynic I ever did come across. The old tasselhead used to say:

"When you reason it out, like I have, you'll see that everybody has the same ambition,

which is to get something for nothing, or at least for as little as possible. Always was thataway, always will be."

Caleb was no exception himself, not by a long shot. He had a cow ranch near Las Vegas, Nevada—over on the Arizona side of the Colorado River—but he put in more time and thought in scheming a way to beat the gamblers than he did in producing beef.

He finally worked out a system to beat the roulette wheel, a dream a flock of folks have had and which never does work out. So he headed for town one day and put his dope to work at one of the glittering palaces of chance. He bought himself a stack of dollar chips and bucked the game steadily for an hour, then cashed in and counted up his profits. He had won $2780.

He went home with his winnings and showed up about a week later with $1000 of it for playstakes. An hour playing the wheel, another cleanup. This time, $3100.

This, Caleb decided, beat cattle ranching. He sold out his spread lock, stock and barrel to a neighbor and came to town.

His third whirl at the wheel netted him only a little better than $400.

The games weren't crooked. They didn't have to be, for gambling percentage always favors the house, and bigtime professional gamblers play it straight.

But however it was, Caleb started to lose. His "system," whatever it was, just didn't work any more. He went bust, and some more besides. He appealed to his ranch neighbor for a job.

Here's how Caleb wound up—running his own ranch for wages, and those partly applied to the purchase price, on which terms pretty soon the neighbor paid off and all Caleb had left was a job punching cattle that had been his before he figured out a way "to beat the game."

So getting something for nothing turned out to be a bad bargain, as it always is. Expecting to get the benefits of citizenship in the U.S.A. for nothing—without taxes and other obligations due—is also an empty dream. It won't work. And here's something else. Uncle Sam has his "house men" who keep an eye peeled for system players in the tax game.

All of which brings us back to where we started. Which leaves me wondering if this rainmaking game, another system of "getting something for nothing," will really pan out in the long run.

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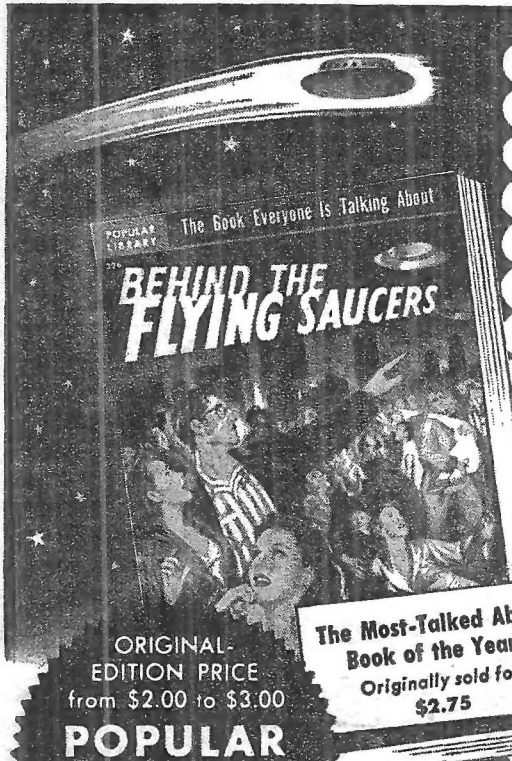

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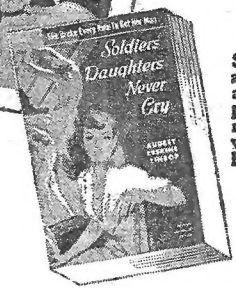

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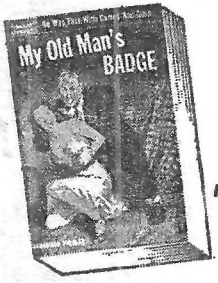

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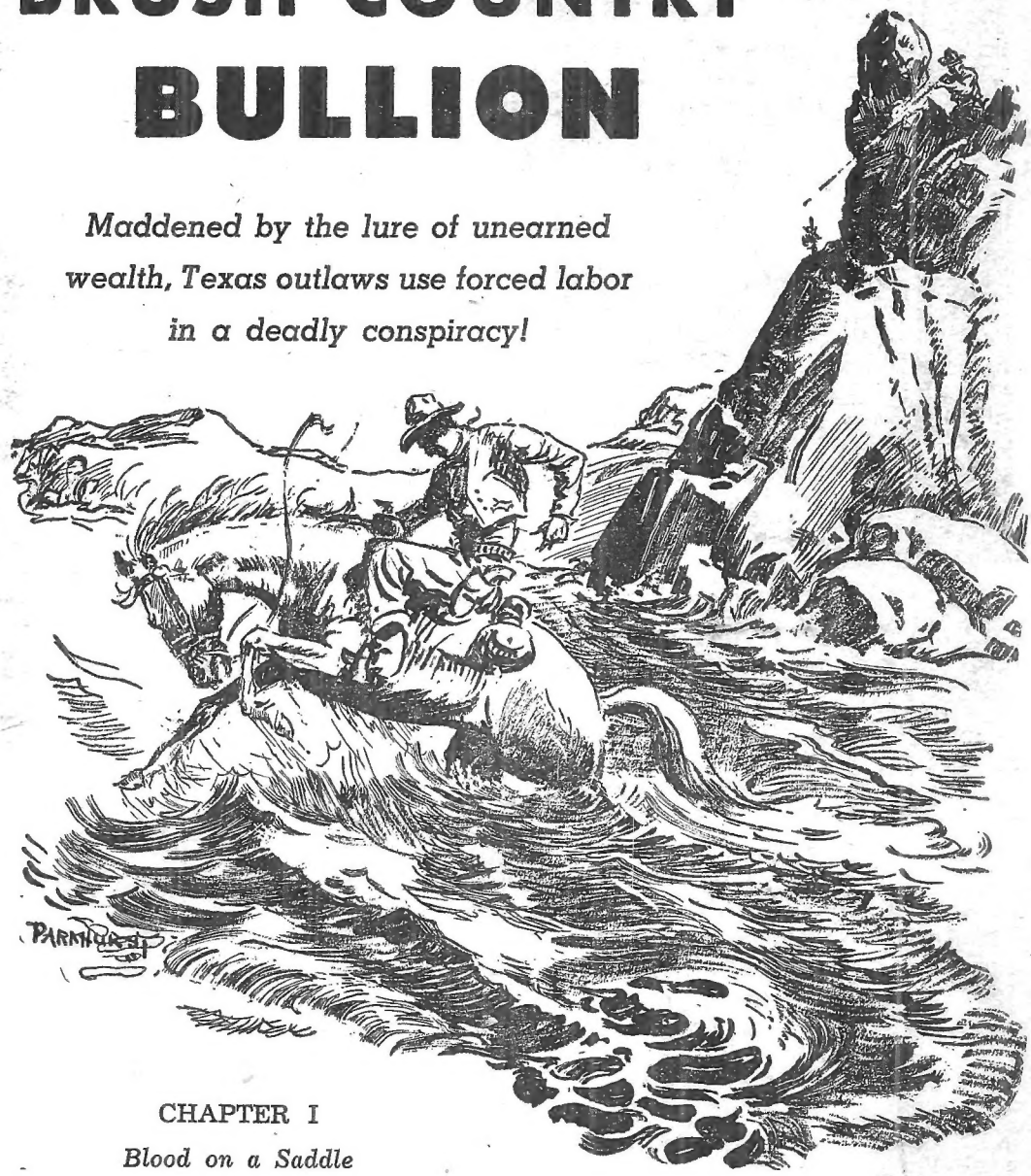


A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Blood on a Saddle

LIKE a stump of broken cowhorn the sandstone pinnacle reared fifty feet above the Nueces River, the only landmark to break the monotony of these brasada jungles between the horizons. The crest of the pink rock was fractured to form a notch like the rear sight of a Winchester. In

Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield Bucks Odds on

that notch the notorious outlaw "Doc" LeBeck hunkered down with a rifle at his side and a brass telescope cupped in his palms.

With luck, he was reminding himself, the Texas Ranger who had trailed him these past three hundred miles sooner or later would show up on the ribbon of trail which led to the Cowhorn Rock ford of the Nueces. If daylight held that long, the Ranger would be a prime target for LeBeck's .30-30. He had bagged bighorn goats at better than a thousand yards with that Winchester. A man of Jim Hatfield's bulk, mounted on his magnificent golden stallion, should be easily tagged with a steel-jacketed bullet.

LeBeck was positive that the lawman who was trailing him could only be Jim Hatfield, celebrated throughout the West as the Lone Wolf, a name that had been given him long ago by an appreciative old Captain of Rangers. No other star packer in Texas could stick to a trail so relentlessly, refusing to be outwitted by the tricks LeBeck had used to throw off his pursuit, tricks that would have done credit to a Comanche warrior or a trap-wise old prairie lobo.

LeBeck's eyes smarted with the strain of this past hour's vigil. The endless brasada jungle of the Nueces watershed stretched in all directions from Cowhorn Rock. Heat haze made the horizons shimmer with such a muted lambency that LeBeck could not be sure where these Texas badlands ended and the brassy sky began.

All he could be sure of was that this jungle of thorny junco and prickly pear, mesquite chaparral and flowering agarito clumps was too closely matted for even a *ladino* longhorn to penetrate, let alone a Ranger on horseback. Jim Hatfield would have to keep to the meandering Indian trace LeBeck had used to reach the Nueces, making no attempt to hide his sign.

A hundred yards upstream from Cowhorn Rock, an hour ago, the outlaw had put his own horse down the shale cutbank into the river, avoiding the regular crossing where the Comanche trail followed a gravel bar across the river. LeBeck had used the ford to come back to this side of the Nueces, knowing the shallow saline waters would hide his horse's hoofprints.

The Ranger would be sure to see the marks of LeBeck's first crossing. In all probability he would follow them to the south bank. And for fifty yards he would be under the muzzle of LeBeck's .30-30, as the outlaw perched on the lookout rock below the main ford.

LEBECK'S steeldust gelding—the tenth horse he had stolen for this twenty-day flight from Dalhart up into the Panhandle—was picketed in a motte of smoketrees at the base of Cowhorn Rock. Secreted inside the black medical kitbag behind the cantle of his saddle was $50,000 in greenbacks, part of the loot LeBeck had obtained from an army paymaster he had killed three weeks before in Kansas, a courier bound for the cavalry garrison at Fort Reilly.

The original loot had been closer to a hundred thousand, the other half in gold specie. When the posse chasing Doc had forced him to chance a risky crossing of the flood-swollen Red River he also had been forced to dump the heavy metal to save his own life. Now the specie was lost forever in the shifting quicksands of the Red's bottom.

Robbing the paymaster had been ridiculously simple. The fortune in loot had been handed to him on a platter, so to speak. The paymaster was in the last stages of cholera when Doc LeBeck, who actually was, or had been a surgeon, had volunteered to treat the man in the quarantined back room of a Kansas cowtown saloon.

No one had dared come near the sick

man in the army blue, with the U.S.-branded paymaster's pouch chained to his wrist. It had been easy to administer the overdose of heart stimulant which had put the lieutenant out of his misery. And Doc LeBeck had been well on his way into the Indian Nations with the military pouch before his deed had been discovered by an investigating bartender.

JIM HATFIELD

LeBeck had been heading for a hideout on the Rio Grande. But for a man on the dodge, he was too striking in appearance to risk showing himself at any settlement en route.

His predatory features were grotesque with the pitted scars of a childhood siege of smallpox which had left him with polka-dotted cheeks and bald, scabrous patches in his russet beard. Furthermore, his hair was prematurely white, cotton thick and in striking contrast to the bushy, rust-red cowls of his eyebrows. That was the result of a bout with typhoid fever when still in his teens. And these abnormalities in appearance had been advertised all over the frontier through the medium of sheriff's dodgers and Federal reward posters.

The pockmarks and the silver hair not only had given LeBeck a grotesque physical appearance, and had warped his personality and twisted his exceptionally keen intellect into devious channels of outlawry.

At twenty-five he had graduated with honors from a medical school; now, crowding forty, he could look back on fifteen years of outlawry. Wealth was LeBeck's god, and as an expert on gunshot wounds his services found great demand among the owlhoot legions infesting the West. Outlaws paid a doctor well, especially a doctor with notches on his own gun butts. A surgeon who could be trusted to falsify death certificates on occasion, or keep his mouth shut about various patients he had treated in remote hidouts, patients who were wanted by the law.

Kansas and the Indian Nations had been his stamping ground. Now, for a crime committed far to the north, he was being pursued by a Texas Ranger, by the ace of all Texas Rangers, Jim Hatfield. And he knew the Lone Wolf carried a warrant for his capture, despite the fact that Texas had not known his shadow for nearly fifteen years.

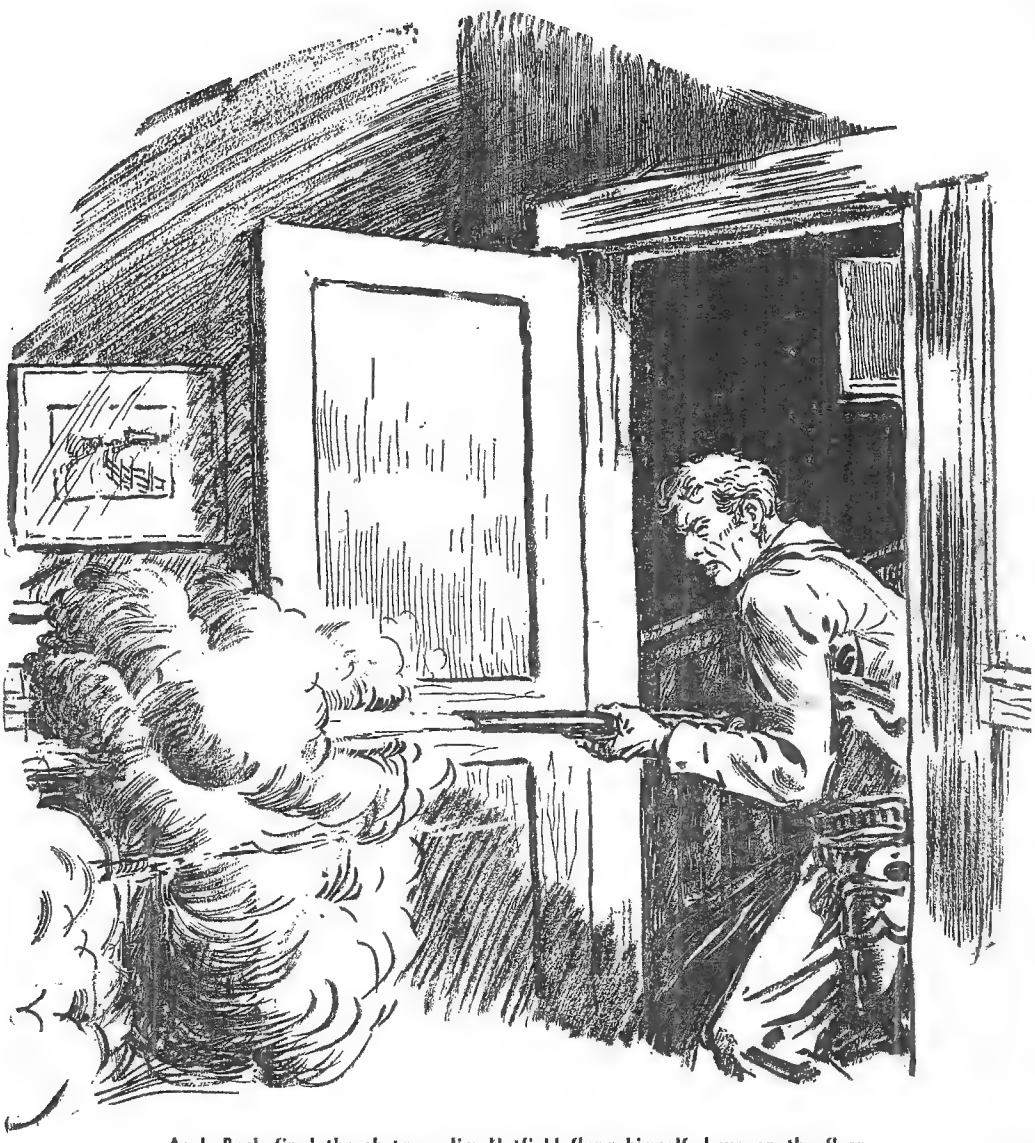
A glint of westering sunlight on metal caught LeBeck's attention. He at once lifted his brass telescope, focusing the ten-power lenses on the strip of Indian trail where it met the north bank of the Nueces.

LeBeck's teeth locked as he saw the horse and rider enter the circular field of the glass. The magnificent deep-chested, white-stockinged golden stallion was positive proof of its rider's identity. That would be Goldy, Jim Hatfield's famous mount. In the past ten days LeBeck had worn out six different horses in his flight, yet Hatfield's powerful stallion gave no

evidence of sore hoofs or broken wind.

The Ranger had reined up and dismounted to study the broken shale where LeBeck had put his steeldust into the river. It had been a flash of sunlight on the ringed silver star pinned to his hickory shirt that had attracted LeBeck's eye.

STUDYING the Lone Wolf under his glass, Doc LeBeck's last doubts as to the lawman's identity vanished. He had heard outlaws discuss Hatfield in awed tones, and this rugged six-footer in the gray Stetson, chocolate-colored batwing chaps had spurred Coffeyville boots tallied with their descriptions of the



As LeBeck fired the shotgun, Jim Hatfield flung himself down on the floor

legendary Ranger who, with Goldy the stallion as his sole companion, had carved out a grim reputation as a law enforcement officer in the Lone Star State. LeBeck did not need the proof of the badge.

The spyglass picked out the blue-black glint of Hatfield's hair, the green glitter of his eyes as he sized up the trail sign leading into the river. The butts of twin Colt .45s in well-oiled holsters pronged out from Hatfield's flanks. The walnut stock of a Winchester carbine, standard issue to all Ranger troops in Texas, jutted from its boot under Goldy's saddle fender.

LeBeck's heart hammered his ribs as he saw Jim Hatfield sizing up the stretch of river which led to the white ripples of the main ford, in the shadow of looming Cowhorn Rock. The possibility of an ambush seemed to be crossing the Ranger's mind, for he mounted the golden stallion hastily and spurred it over the cutbank's rim and

out of LeBeck's view.

"Maybe I wasted the only chance I'll have—"

LeBeck cawed the words, a panicky feeling seizing him. He telescoped the spyglass and picked up his Winchester. Levering a shell into the breech and propping himself up on both elbows, he braced his legs against the V-shaped fissure in the sandstone.

Then he realized that Hatfield would be obliged to cross the river. There was no footing for a horse below the cutbank which led to the Cowhorn ford. A moment later LeBeck caught sight of the Ranger plunging his stallion out into the hock-deep wash of the river, making for the south bank.

Instantly LeBeck went into action then. He steadied as he nestled the stock of his Winchester against a pitted cheek; his arms were rock-firm as he leveled the blued steel rifle barrel, notching his gunsights on Jim Hatfield's broad, blue-shirted back. Carefully, surely . . .

The Nueces was less than fifty yards wide at this point and the main channel was less than belly deep to the stallion. Hatfield was twisting in saddle, scanning the silhouetted upthrust of Cowhorn Rock up the river when a warning almost as strong as if it had been uttered in a physical voice told him that ambush and danger were waiting for him upstream.

Goldy was within fifty feet of the brasada thickets on the south bank when LeBeck, with infinite skill, squeezed off his shot. The blast of the .30-30 made its sharp recoil against the outlaw's shoulder. The racketing echoes of the gunshot raced off across the thorny thickets to whisper themselves into limbo in the remote distance, leaving the vacuumlike silence of death.

A sluggish breeze dissipated the powdersmoke and through that shifting blue-gray veil LeBeck saw that his bullet had struck home. Goldy's saddle was now empty, and the horse was flogging it up the bank toward the brush.

Panting heavily, Doc LeBeck snatched up his spyglass and focused it on the silver ripples of the Nueces. He saw a Stetson floating on the crest of the current. Momentarily he saw a human shape flounder limply as it snagged on a mud bar, and then he saw Jim Hatfield's inert body vanish below the muddy waters, dragged down by the weight of shell belts and heavy cowboots.

ONLY once more did the outlaw, who now came to his feet in the notch atop Cowhorn Rock, catch sight of his bushwhack victim. He saw Jim Hatfield's spurred boots break the surface as the sluggish current swept the Ranger out of sight around a tule-furred bend of the river downstream.

Scrambling down from his rocky perch, LeBeck cased his rifle and tightened the latigo of his mount's saddle. Mounting, he spurred back down to the main ford and crossed to the opposite bank, reaction making his whole body tremble.

Jim Hatfield's golden stallion was picking its way downstream along the south bank, reins dragging. Putting his telescope on the horse, LeBeck had further confirmation that his bullet had bagged his target—the swellfork pommel of the ranger's saddle was splashed with the crimson of bloodstains.

For a moment LeBeck struggled with an inordinate desire to dab his loop on Hatfield's magnificent mount. But Goldy was far too well-known in Texas as the property of Jim Hatfield to make him a horse a man could safely sell or trade. Besides, legend had it that Goldy was strictly a one-man horse—docile as a plow horse where Hatfield was concerned, but four-footed dynamite for strangers.

Pushing into the opening of the Comanche trail which followed the south bank of the Nueces, LeBeck drew the first easy breath he had enjoyed since Hatfield picked up his trail crossing the Llano Estecado ten days ago.

Hatfield, greatest Ranger of them all, was dead now. LeBeck would never boast a more distinguished notch on his gun butt.

Less than ten miles from this ambus-

cade—if a telegram LeBeck had dispatched anonymously from Dodge City had reached its destination—Voyd Romane and "Latigo" Modesto would be waiting for him at *Los Soldados Muertos* Ford, outlaws who would guide him to the safety of their hideout on the Rio Grande. Then this grim flight south from Kansas would fade like a bad dream.

CHAPTER II

Killers' Rendezvous

THE campfire of blazing greasewood and 'squite chunks cut an orange hole in the background of the brasada, shimmered on the riffles where the Nueces spilled over the broad shelf of gravel known as *Los Soldados Muertos* ford. "Dead Soldiers' Ford"—named for a platoon of Confederate cavalrymen who had been massacred here by a band of Comanches in the closing months of the War Between the States.

Doc LeBeck sat with his back braced against the red-barked bole of a manzanita, savoring a panatela which Latigo Modesto had given him. Solid comfort surfeited the outlaw, a welcome respite at the end of his flight through the Lone Star State. His stomach was satisfied with the first good food he had eaten this side of the Cimarron River. Voyd Romane could make black coffee, Chihuahuan *frijoles* in chili sauce, and ordinary sowbelly taste like caviar and champagne.

The two Rio Granders who had been waiting for him here were hunkered on their Justins across the fire from LeBeck, feasting their eyes on the packets of army pay-roll currency which the medico had removed from his black satchel for them to see. A share of that *dinero* would be theirs when they reached safety in the Big Bend country west of the Pecos.

Modesto and Romane were a sinister-looking pair of opposite coloring. Modesto was a *pelado* of mixed Chihuahuan and Yankee blood, who wore the cone-shaped sombrero and serape of a Mexican. Straw-haired Romane was a Missourian. He wore the leather chaps, pony-skin vest and up-brimmed Stetson of an ordinary cowhand.

Rustling wetbacks across the Rio in the dark of the moon was Romane's trade. Modesto had turned his outlaw talents to smuggling contraband across the border.

Both outlaws owed their lives to Doc LeBeck's skill with scalpel and probe, years back. When LeBeck had dispatched his cryptic telegram from Dodge City, signing it "Sawbones", he knew he could count on Modesto or Romane to come to his aid. The message could never be traced to him. LeBeck had identified *Los Soldados Muertes* Ford on the Nueces by referring to it as the place where fifteen years ago, this pair of Border hoppers had been stricken with "poison"—lead poisoning. The pair who faced LeBeck across campfire's shine tonight still carried the blobs of .45 slugs in their pockets for luck, the bullets LeBeck had removed from their hides a decade and a half ago.

"We got your telegram at Del Rio, Doc," Romane was saying, as he scrubbed a skillet dry with a tuft of dead grass. "No way to reach you, 'course, but Latigo and me were worried for fear you'd never locate this ford. Even old-time brushhoppers can get lost roamin' across this brasada country."

LeBeck grinned affably, letting fragrant cigar smoke fork through his nostrils. "I got good news for you, boys," the medico said in his modulated, cultured voice. "I imagine you've both heard plenty of Jim Hatfield, the star Ranger in McDowell's troop at Austin?"

"The Lone Wolf?" chuckled Romane. "Who ain't?"

"*Si,*" commented the half-breed. "Senor Hatfield ees a name to geeve me nightmares."

LeBeck chuckled. "Don't let him disturb your slumbers any more, *amigo*. I sacked his saddle for him just before sundown. 'Bushed him at Cowhorn Rock, five miles up the river."

Romane's jaw sagged in astonishment. "That shot we heard!" the Missouri killer whispered. "You mean that tallied Hatfield?"

LeBeck nodded. "He crowded my back track all the way from the Staked Plains, gentlemen. I regret to say that no autopsy will ever be held on his body, but I would diagnose his fatal ailment as a metallic trauma of the cardiac organ."

"You and your big words, Doc," Romane growled. "You mean—"

"A bullet in the heart. My slug went clean through him."

OUT beyond the firelight, the picketed mounts of the three campers headed up and snorted nervously into the night. Jumping as if a bee had stung him, Voyd Romane dumped the contents of a wreck-pan full of dishwater over the campfire coals, plunging the clearing into total darkness.

"Why so jumpy?" LeBeck drawled from his position under the manzanita. "Our mounts probably got the scent of an armadillo or a coyote skulking through the cactus."

Something was obviously disturbing the picketed horses, however. The three men, tensely keening the night, could hear the animals pawing the ground nervously and whickering.

"Better go see what's spookin' them broncs, Latigo," Romane growled, his voice barely audible above the hissing of steam from the drowned coals. "Can't risk 'em pullin' their picket pins. We're twenty miles from the nearest stable, fifty from the nearest brushpopper's ranch."

In the darkness, Doc LeBeck moved quickly over to his spread-out bedroll on which his army payroll loot was spread, and put the money in his satchel. If a passing *vaquero* was nearing their camp, on his way to *Los Soldados Muertos* ford, it would not do for so much currency to be in plain sight.

Latigo Modesto, palming a six-gun, went stalking off toward the river to investigate whatever was alarming their saddle horses. At the campsite, LeBeck said testily:

"A man on the dodge can't afford to let his nerves reach such a jumpy state, Voyd. Get another fire started. I could use some more of that coffee."

Reaching the patch of grama grass where the three horses were picketed out to graze, Modesto checked the ropes and headstalls and found nothing wrong. He felt half ashamed of his own nervousness. Riders rarely frequently this river crossing so far from civilization.

A full moon was just lifting over the eastern horizon, its golden globe caught now in the skeleton arms of a dead palo verde tree beyond the camp. The Border-hopper could hear his partner gathering up dry twigs to start another fire. No hint of peril was on the night wind.

A rustling in the brush at the edge of the brasada nearest the grazing ground caught Modesto's sharply attuned ear. It sounded to him like a rattlesnake slithering through the dead mesquite leaves, although he knew snakes were rare in this vicinity; they haunted rockier regions. But a sidewinder could spook horses, and something was definitely moving over at the edge of the spiny thickets.

No longer afraid that a human visitor was approaching the river through the brasáda trail, the serape-clad 'breed stalked his way over to the edge of the thicket, kicking his boots through the dead grass, listening for the buzz of a reptile there.

Then, without warning, Latigo Modesto felt himself suddenly overpowered by a human adversary. A chap-clad leg caught him between the knees, simultaneously with the throttling pressure of an arm locked around his throat from behind. The tripping boot drove the half-breed to the ground. He was frantically whipping aside his serape to get at his gun butts when he felt the unmistakable kiss of a bowie knife blade cutting through the fabric of his shirt and pricking the skin over his heart.

Flat on his back, with strangling arm about his neck preventing him from giving the slightest outcry, Modesto froze as he saw the moonlight limning the sharp-

chiseled features of an American directly above him. It was the ring-encircled silver star of a Texas Ranger pinned to his attacker's shirt that wilted the last hint of resistance from the half-breed's veins.

"I'm Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger," came a low whisper close to Modesto's ear. "Keep quiet and make *habla* with me and I'll keep this knife out of your hide. *Sabe usted?*"

Raw horror flooded through the half-breed. Jim Hatfield, or his ghost? Hadn't Doc LeBeck said he had ambushed this lawman, just a moment before the startled whickering of their horses had taken Modesto out of the camp?

MODESTO nodded frantically to signify his willingness to keep quiet, and he felt the choking pressure of the Ranger's elbow relax its vise grip on his neck.

"What ees eet you weesh to know, Senor Rangero?" Modesto panted in a weak whisper.

Keeping the point of his knife blade over the *pelado's* pounding heart, the Lone Wolf Ranger asked:

"You've got a man camping with you—who is he?"

Modesto shrugged his pinioned-down shoulders.

His eyes rolled whitely in the growing moonlight as he said:

"*Quien sabe?* My companero and I, we make camp here thees evening, senor. Thees greengo come, ask us for food. Hees name I do not know. The brand on hees *caballo* I do not know. *Es verdad—*"

Hatfield, both knees straddling Modesto's prostrate form, was staring off across the clearing toward the camp.

"I tossed a pebble at your ponies to make 'em spook," the Ranger whispered. "Pronto one of you doused the fire. "Why?"

Again Modesto shrugged. "Thees country, she ees' *muy peligroso*—very dangerous, senor. My compadre and I are honest *vaqueros,* hunting for strayed *vacas* een the brasada. Eet ees not safe to be caught against a fire, senor."

Hatfield pursed his lips thoughtfully. "This stranger who is camped with you—I trailed him down the Nueces after he grazed my shoulder with a rifle bullet, senor. If your visitor is the man I think he is he has a scarred face and *blanco* hair."

Modesto nodded desperately. "*Si,* that ees the man, senor. My companero Voyd Romane and me, we not know thees *visitador* ees a *malo hombre.*"

HATFIELD got to his feet, pulling Modesto up behind him.

"I have no reason not to believe you, *amigo,*" he said grimly, sheathing his bowie knife. "But I can take no chances with so much at stake. I must hogtie and gag you, *sabe?*"

Modesto made no outcry as the Ranger pulled him out of sight into the brasada thickets. In the m e a l y darkness here the half-breed heard the soft breathing of a horse and realized that Hatfield had approached this camp after dark on his golden stallion.

Removing the bandanna he wore as a neckpiece, Hatfield quickly knotted it around the half-breed's mouth, gagging him against any betraying outcry. Then, reaching for an invisible saddle pommel, Hatfield took a coiled lass'-rope from Goldy's saddle and, working with swift skill in the darkness, trussed Modesto's arms behind his back and roped his legs tightly at knee and ankle.

In rendering his victim helpless, Hatfield had removed Modesto's ball-tasseled sombrero and woolen serape. His bound and gagged victim had no way of seeing the Lone Wolf hang his own Stetson on his saddle-horn and quickly don the Mexican sombrero in its stead.

Covering his shoulders with Modesto's voluminous serape, Hatfield made his way out of the thicket and headed across the clearing toward the spot where Voyd Romane now had a new campfire blazing ruddily.

The Ranger caught Romane's voice as he closed the distance that was between them.

"Wonder what's keepin' Modesto so long?" Then, in a louder voice, Romane shouted tentatively, "*Hola*, Latigo! Our stock all right over there?"

"*Bueno*," Hatfield replied, knowing that by now he was in Romane's range of vision as he approached the fire.

Hatfield's pulses raced as he recognized Doc LeBeck hunkered on his boot heels alongside the blazing fire, putting a can of coffee astraddle two rocks to boil. The guttering red light cast a diabolical glare over LeBeck's face, accentuating the stippled pocks on his leathery cheeks, turning his albino-white hair to a satanic red hue.

PALMING a six-gun under the flowing serape he wore, Hatfield saw Romane ignore him as he turned to pick up brush for replenishing the fire. The cigar between LeBeck's teeth ebbed and glowed as the outlaw surgeon poured coffee into a tin cup.

"What was boogering the horses, Latigo?" Romane asked without turning in Hatfield's direction, as the Ranger strode boldly into the warm glow of the campfire.

"A Texas Ranger scouting your camp, Romane," came the steely voice which issued from under Modesto's wide-brimmed sombrero.

With an oath, Roman whirled about to face the man he had assumed to be his partner. In that instant Hatfield shook off the Mexican serape, and the leaping firelight glinted off the black bores of twin six-guns which held Romane and Doc LeBeck under a point-blank drop.

"You may think you're seeing a ghost, Doctor LeBeck," the Lone Wolf Ranger ground out with a chilly menace, "but don't try slamming that hot coffee in my face. Consider yourself under arrest."

The tin cup dropped from LeBeck's nerveless fingers as he came to his feet. Staring in shocked bewilderment across the campfire he could not believe that he had just seen his tin-starred Nemesis shake off that Mexican sombrero with a jerk of his shoulders.

CHAPTER III

Sheriff of Cascabel

GROPING his arms aloft, LeBeck got himself under control with effort. Staring at the lump of bandage under the Ranger's shirt, at the point of his left shoulder, he knew that his ambush bullet had been high and wide of its mark. Hatfield's shirt was still damp from his immersion in the river, and Nueces mud caked to his chaps and spike-heeled boots told its own story. No, this was no ghost resurrected from a watery grave.

"My congratulations, Hatfield," LeBeck murmured. "It seems the notch I put on my rifle stock was a trifle premature."

The Lone Wolf gestured with his left-hand gun to where Voyd Romane stood in a frozen terror.

"Unbuckle your gun harness," Hatfield snapped, "then do the same for the doctor here."

LeBeck spoke quickly. "This man is guiltless, Senor Ranger. He and his companion whom you doubtlessly stabbed to death out there were merely camped here. Do not blame them for extending the hospitality of the West to a passing rider."

Romane loosened his cartridge belts and tossed them to one side. LeBeck's words seemed to have heartened him.

"That's right, Mr. Ranger," he said hoarsely. "Me and my pard were huntin' mavericks in the brush. I don't know this hombre you're after from Adam, except-in' he's wearin' clothes."

Hatfield made no comment, keeping his full attention on Romane as the *vaquero* removed LeBeck's six-shooter from holster and tossed it over beside his own Colt harness.

During the twenty minutes Hatfield had spied on this camp from the brasada jungle ringing it, he had been unable to pick up the low-voiced conversation between LeBeck and the two obvious Bor-

der riffraff. An intervening clump of tornillo scrub had prevented the Ranger from spotting the telltale greenbacks LeBeck had displayed to this pair, greenbacks which LeBeck had now concealed again.

The way Hatfield figured this situation, LeBeck was speaking truth in saying that the Mexican and Romane were strangers to him. It would be too coincidental, too far-fetched to assume that LeBeck's aimless flight across Texas was heading him for this obviously temporary camp at Dead Soldiers' Ford. LeBeck's stamping ground was farther north, in Kansas.

On the other hand, a tiny doubt continued to gnaw at the Ranger's instincts. Something was off key here. Or was his fatigue and lack of sleep making him suspicious?

"What were you and your partner doing here, Romane?" Hatfield asked the blond giant in the pony-skin vest.

Romane shrugged, licking his lips. "Latigo and me? Why, we work for Sven Hjelmquist's S Bar H outfit over in Zavala County this side of Uvalde. We're huntin' stray stuff and mavericks to slap the boss' iron on. Naturally we'd camp near water and grass."

Hatfield tongued his cheek, thinking this over. Two of the horses across the clearing were branded S Bar H. Despite prior visits to this section of Texas, the name Hjelmquist was not familiar to him, but the matter was of no great importance.

"All right, Romane," Hatfield said. "I'm not after you or your *mestizo* friend. He's hogtied and gagged out in the brush near my horse, but otherwise unhurt. It's this tow-headed son I'm after. Your guest happens to be wanted for the murder of an army finance officer up in Kansas. Do you deny that, LeBeck?"

The pock-pitted outlaw smiled. When he glanced at Romane, a signal passed between them which Jim Hatfield missed because of the tricky play of firelight touching their faces. It was as if LeBeck had said, "Don't try anything now. Wait till Hatfield takes me away."

"I will not attempt to mask my identity, Hatfield," LeBeck drawled. "You'll find a portion of that army pay-roll in my medical kit yonder. The specie I had to jettison on my way across the Red, unfortunately. You can believe that or not as you choose."

HATFIELD walked over to the black pebble-grained doctor's kitbag which LeBeck had indicated. It bore his initials, "LeB," in gold. Snapping open the satchel, Hatfield saw that it contained several bundles of United States currency in addition to LeBeck's surgical instruments and supplies of medicinal drugs.

"All right," the Ranger said, closing the kitbag. "I'm sorry you let your friends know you were carrying this loot, because it will alter my plans concerning them. Romane, bring LeBeck's horse over and saddle it. I'm taking LeBeck to Cascabel tonight."

Romane hurried off to obey the Ranger's order, knowing that any attempt

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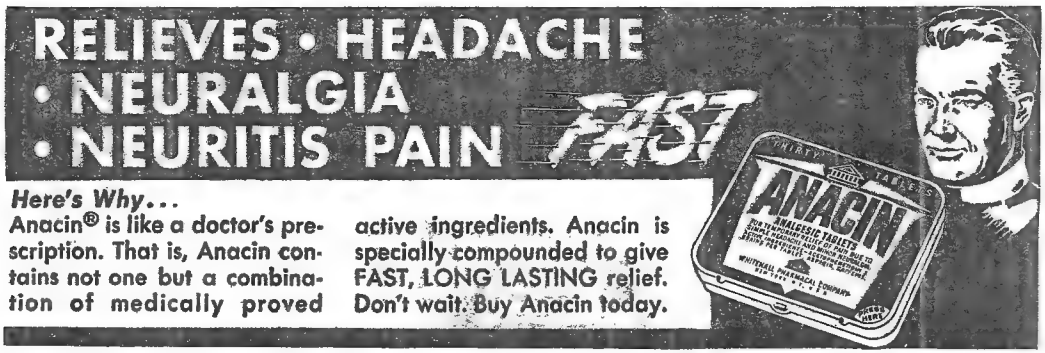
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to rescue LeBeck now would be predoomed to failure. By the time he had led the horse back to the campfire, Hatfield had shackled LeBeck's wrists with handcuffs.

He had also placed Romane's and Modesto's six-guns, together with their saddle carbines, in a gunnysack which the pair had used for carrying their cooking gear.

"What's the idea leavin' us unheeled in this rough country, Ranger?" Romane demanded. "You got nothin' on us. We didn't know we were givin' grub to a wanted man. LeBeck's a stranger to us."

Hatfield shouldered the sack of guns and picked up LeBeck's satchel containing the army loot.

"I'm playing too risky a game to take chances, Romane," he countered. "LeBeck's let you know about this loot of his. You and your partner might get fancy ideas. I'm just t a k i n g out insurance against you two getting ideas about trailing us toward Cascabel and back-shooting me to recover LeBeck's loot."

Romane darted a glance at Doc LeBeck, who was calmly drawing at his cigar. This move of Hatfield's ruined any chance to rescue LeBeck here. Without guns, such a coup would be impossible.

"Cascabel town is fifteen miles down the Nueces," Hatfield went on. "I will turn this sack of guns over to Sheriff Payne and leave instructions for him to turn them over to you when you show up and make proper identification."

Romane growled an oath as he reached for LeBeck's saddle and bridle and fitted them on the steeldust for the night journey to Cascabel.

"Either you lied when you said you wasn't after me and Latigo," Romane grumbled, "or else you're accusin' us of bein' owlhooters like LeBeck here. Either way, I don't like it."

Hatfield tucked LeBeck's satchel under one arm and reached for the reins of LeBeck's horse.

"You're perfectly welcome," he told Romane, "to ride with us to Cascabel tonight, if you wish."

Romane shook his head.

"Naw." Latigo and me are tuckered from a long day's brushpoppin'. We got a jag of S Bar steers corraled back in the brush a ways. We'll pick up our shootin' irons in town first chance we get, Ranger, and be danged to you."

Hatfield took a n o t h e r careful look around the camp to make sure he had overlooked no weapons, recognizing Romane's ugly mood, and realizing its justification. Then he led LeBeck's horse to the far edge of the clearing where he had left the trussed-up Modesto.

The orange globe of the moon had floated free of the dead tree now, its disk promising plenty of light for their overnight trek to Cascabel, the nearest cowtown.

Ground-tying LeBeck's pony, Hatfield ducked into the brush and emerged shortly with his stallion, Goldy. He was coiling his reata when the disgruntled Latigo Modesto emerged from the underbrush.

The moon had shed its pink sheen and donned its night-cruising silver now, flooding the Dead Soldiers river crossing with a ghostly white light. Hatfield adjusted his s a d d l e girth and mounted Goldy, dallying a trail rope around his horn, the other end tied to the ring of the steeldust's bit. Slung behind his cantle, Hatfield had the gunnysack laden with the six-guns and rifles of LeBeck's hosts at this camp.

"*Adios,* my friends," LeBeck called out as Hatfield headed for the river ford. "Much obliged for the rations. I'm sorry my showing up to partake of your hospitality inconvenienced you as it did, but the law must take its course."

BY NOW Modesto had joined his companion over by the dying campfire. The half-breed's remark did not carry to Hatfield above the gurgle of the Nueces over the shallow ford.

"What'll we do, Voyd? We can't let that star-toter mosey off with Doc like this! Part of that fifty thousand pesos is our'n."

Romane groaned despairingly. "Hat-

field out-foxed us, pard. I don't rightly see what we *can* do to help Doc, the cards bein' stacked like they are. But we'll save Doc sooner or later, by grab."

The two outlaws watched helplessly as they saw the Lone Wolf and his prisoner vanish into the brasada on the opposite bank of the Nueces. By taking their guns, Hatfield had blocked any chance of rescuing Doc LeBeck, at least tonight.

Throughout the remaining hours of the night, Hatfield kept steadily to the meandering trail which flanked the north bank of the river, knowing it would eventually lead him to the town of Cascabel, trading center of the range.

Keeping awake was Hatfield's greatest trouble. He envied LeBeck who, despite the fact that a hangrope awaited him at the end of this trail, was snoring comfortably in saddle.

The pain of his bullet-nicked shoulder helped keep Hatfield awake. He knew that wound was more painful than serious, but it would require medical attention when they reached the cowtown. Another reason the Ranger had for steering to the nearest settlement was to reach a telegraph station and notify the Army that their fugitive pay-roll robber was at last in custody.

Owing to the narrowness of the twisting brasada trail, Hatfield was forced to keep both horses to a walk. Whipping brush tore at his wounded shoulder continuously. The scraping foliage did not once rouse LeBeck from his exhausted slumbers, or else the prisoner was adept at playing possum.

As a result, dawn's light was in the Ranger's eyes before he had finished the fifteen-mile journey from *Los Soldados Muertos* ford. But he finally emerged from the thorny jungle of brasada to see the false-fronted buildings of Cascabel mirrored in the sluggish ripples of the Nueces.

This town was the trading point for the hardy ranchers who raised stock in this prickly pear desert. It boasted a ramshackle courthouse, a half-dozen adobe saloons and gambling houses, a livery stable and a few stores.

Several years back, Hatfield had paid a visit to Cascabel, so he knew the lay of the land here. As a result, he headed directly down the wheel-rutted main street to the low brick building in one corner of the palmetto-fringed courthouse plaza. Except for a swamper or two at work sweeping the porches of saloons, the town was not yet stirring as the Ranger and his prisoner turned into the arched gateway of the courthouse square and reined up in front of the jail.

Doc LeBeck was climbing stiffly from saddle, wincing from the pain of his constricting handcuffs, when Hatfield saw the front door of the jail office open. It revealed the raw-boned figure of his friend Wes Payne, Sheriff of Brasada County.

It had been years since this salty old Texas lawman had laid eyes on Hatfield, but he recognized the handsome young Ranger instantly. A wide grin appeared under his tobacco-stained waterfall mustache.

"Howdy, Jim," Wes Payne said, gripping his hand heartily. "Got a customer for my *juzgado*, eh?"

"Doc LeBeck," Hatfield said wearily, "Murdered an army pay-roll officer up in Kansas a month ago. I dabbed my twine on him at the *Soldados Muertos* ford last night."

Payne led the way into the stuffy jail and down the corridor to the cell-block. He locked Hatfield's prisoner in a cell alongside one in which an oldster wearing a faded Confederate uniform was stretched out asleep on a cot.

"Major Vanhorne," the sheriff explained to Hatfield. "He's goin' to hang. Knifed a hostler over at the stable, quarrelin' over a four-bit charge for groomin' his horse. Funny what picayune antics can put a rope around a man's neck, ain't it?"

OUT in the front office, Payne regarded Hatfield quizzically.

"You look plumb tuckered, son," Payne said. "Better come over to the house and let my daughter Nita fix you up with a

hot breakfast. Nita's a grown woman now—not the ganglin' tike in pigtails she was when you used to know her. Then you can turn in and sleep out the day in my spare bunk."

Hatfield waited until Payne had deposited LeBeck's payroll loot in the jail safe. Then he said:

"I can sure use a snack of bait and some sleep, Wes. Been trailing this LeBeck for ten days, doing my sleeping in the saddle. First, though, I've got to roust up a telegraph operator and let the Army know I nabbed their man. And then get a dressing slapped on this sore shoulder."

The sheriff nodded. "Sure. But the Overland Telegraph don't open till eight, which is two hours off. Write out your message and I'll send it for you, Jim."

Seated at the sheriff's desk, Hatfield composed a telegram to Fort Reilly, Kansas, the destination of the lieutenant LeBeck had murdered, and a report to Captain Bill McDowell, his superior at Ranger headquarters in Austin.

"It'll take a day or two for the Army to send a man to take LeBeck into custody, Wes," Hatfield said. "Reckon I'll have to impose on your hospitality durin' that time, Sheriff Payne."

CHAPTER IV

Doomed Man's Narrative

ABOUT two hours later Sheriff Payne entered the bullpen of his jail, bearing a tray of breakfast apiece for his two prisoners. The sun, streaming through the narrow barred windows of the Cascabel jail, was poised atop the crossbar of the gallows in the jail yard, where Payne would be hanging old Major Vanhorne less than twenty-four hours from now.

Payne found Vanhorne playing chess with the debonair killer Jim Hatfield had brought in for safekeeping. The players were moving the pieces through the bars of the cell partition.

"I see you two have got acquainted," Payne remarked. "Glad you got somethin' to take your mind off the rope, Major. I ain't enjoyin' the prospect any more'n you are, believe me."

Vanhorne grunted, turning away from the chessboard on the end of his jail cot, and reaching for the tray of food the sheriff was sliding through the cell door.

"The doctor makes better company than the drunken cowhands you've usually got roostin' in this other cell," the doomed man commented. "I was the chess champeen of Jeb Stewart's cavalry in my younger days, but danged if'n this LeBeck gentleman ain't got me checkmated already."

As the sheriff was turning to leave, Doc LeBeck looked up from his tray of food.

"Send in that distinguished Ranger, if you please, Sheriff," he called softly. "I slept all the way up the river last night and I have a few things to discuss with my guardian."

Payne slapped a gallus strap back over his shoulder.

"Hatfield's catchin' up on his own sleep over at my shack, mister. I aim to let him sleep till he wakes up."

"How long must I endure the doubtful comforts of this bastille, then?" LeBeck said testily.

Payne shrugged. "Hatfield's wired the authorities. Reckon the Army will send an officer over from San Antone to pick you up in two-three days."

After the sheriff departed, the two prisoners went to work on their breakfasts with gusto. LeBeck had a tolerant interest in the grizzled oldster in the next cell, feeling a common bond with Vanhorne. The latter's troubles would be over this time tomorrow. LeBeck, as yet, could not see his way clear to beat the noose. It would depend on how Modesto and Romane handled things during the short interval before Hatfield would be turning him over to the custody of a U.S. Marshal or Army officer.

Finishing his coffee, LeBeck stared curiously through the bars at the old man in the next cell. Major Vanhorne, he had

learned, was a Confederate war veteran who had served under the immortal Jeb Stuart with the Texas Volunteer Regiment. What had brought the old man to this forsaken brasada wilderness, LeBeck could not imagine. All he knew was that Vanhorne had knifed a stable tender here in Cascabel while under the influence of Mexican *tequila*, and was under sentence to mount the gallows at dawn tomorrow.

Vanhorne shoved his breakfast tray to one side and mopped his leathery, onion-bald head with a grimy bandanna. His rheumy eyes peered sharply at LeBeck.

"Get back to our game?" he asked.

LeBeck shrugged. "You are an unusual man, Major. I mean, being able to concentrate on chess, your last day alive."

Vanhorne chuckled thinly. "Run of the cards. The heck of it, Doctor, is that if I hadn't swigged one too many *tequilas* I would have been a rich man at this moment."

LeBeck's brows arched. "And if it had not been for a Texas Ranger named Jim Hatfield, I would have been a rich man, too, Major. In fact, I have better than fifty thousand dollars out in the sheriff's safe at this moment. So near and yet so far, to coin a phrase."

VANHORNE exhumed a malodorous corncob from his tunic and packed it with tobacco, his eyes never leaving LeBeck's sinisterly scarified features.

"You seem to be perty pert yoreself, for a man who was wearin' Jim Hatfield's bracelets when you got here, Doctor." Vanhorne's eyes narrowed questioningly. "You strike me," he went on in a steely whisper, "as a man who has an ace up his sleeve. You figger on beatin' Hatfield at his own game, Doctor?"

LeBeck lighted up the stub of cheroot which he had salvaged from the night before.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "my outlook is not entirely hopeless, though I would say it is ninety per cent so." I have two friends in the locality who know I am incarcerated here in Cascabel. They may make some effort to, shall we say, extricate me from the coils of the law."

Vanhorne fingered his stringy imperial whiskers thoughtfully.

"Any chance of your friends showin' up before—"

"Before your deadline with the noose tomorrow, Major?" LeBeck said. "I'm sorry, friend, but don't stake any hope on that. You see, Hatfield plans to turn me over to the Federal authorities, for transfer elsewhere. If I am to be rescued, my friends must wait until I am outside of this citadel of durance vile."

Vanhorne accepted LeBeck's gloomy report with a philosophical grunt. This old warrior, well into his seventies, had many days past steeled himself for the inevitable retribution the law would exact tomorrow. He had faced death too many times on the battlefield to d r e a d its approach now.

"My friend," Vanhorne said finally, shuffling his way closer to the end of the cot next to LeBeck's cell, "I am going to tell you why I find myself in this miserable pokey. I understand you to say that this Texas Ranger captured you at *Los Soldados Muertos* ford last night?"

LeBeck lighted his cigar, nodding curiously. He had no slightest interest in Vanhorne's autobiography, but the least he could do was appear to listen.

"Dead Soldiers Ford," Vanhorne went on. "Do you know how that river crossing got that name? No? I shall tell you. Back in the spring of 'sixty-five, a platoon of Johnny Reb troops were escorting a Conestoga wagon out from Arizona. The soldiers were under the command of one Colonel Frank Cushman, A.C.S. I was a lieutenant of cavalry then. In fact, the title of Major is one I picked up after the Cause was lost."

Vanhorne paused to swat a blue bottle fly that was annoying him. In the next cell, LeBeck appeared to be listening.

"You may wonder why General Lee could spare a platoon of troops to fetch a wagon from out West, when the South needed every man it could scrape up to meet Grant's assaults, eh? I shall tell you, Doctor."

Vanhorne pitched his voice to a pregnant whisper which, in spite of himself, Doc LeBeck found himself straining to hear.

"That Conestoga carried a load of bullion bars from the Comstock Lode in Nevada," the old soldier went on. "Half a million in *plata* which our Copperhead sympathizers out in Virginia City stole from the damyankees. Silver that would have helped win the war had it reached General Lee in time.

"But that was not to be. Crossing the Rio Nueces at the precise spot where Jim Hatfield captured you last night, my friend LeBeck, a band of Comanche Indians attacked us. The massacre was nearly complete. Only my commanding officer and myself escaped, riding the wagon, while the redskins tarried to collect scalps from the graycoats they had ambushed.

"We drove that wagon like the devil was after us. He was, too—in the form of howling savages. Before we had traveled ten miles the Comanches had overtaken us, cut down our mules. It was on the brink of a canyon. Directly below us was a natural asphalt pit—what the border Mexicanos call a *brea* deposit. A tar pit."

MAJOR VANHORNE closed his eyes, his brain reconstructing that long-ago tragedy in the heart of the Texas wilderness.

"Colonel Cushman and I cut the wagon free of the dead mules and rolled the Conestoga and its load of silver over the cliff," the old man reminisced on. "It sank in that tar pit like a rock in a quicksand *sumadero*. We took refuge in nearby rocks, trying to hold off those screaming red devils. The Colonel was an engineer. He spent the hours we crouched in hiding, waiting for the Indians to close in on us, in computing the latitude and longitude of our location. You understand, he felt that if one or the other of us escaped when night fell, we could let the Confederacy know w h e r e they could recover that silver."

Vanhorne went silent for a long time.

"Yes?" LeBeck prompted him, out of courtesy more than any genuine interest in the old soldier's recital of a frontier tragedy of the remote past. As a doctor, he believed Vanhorne was demented.

"Well, the Indians closed in when it got dark," Vanhorne said. "Don't ask me how I got away with my hair. Cushman died with a Comanche tomahawk in his noggin. I shot my way through a wall of warbonneted tarnation and hid in the jungle. It took me two months to reach San Antonio, subsisting on mesquite beans and rattlesnake meat and water out of cactus stalks. I reached civilization a raving maniac. A Mexican woman nursed me back to my health.

"I recovered my senses on the fifteenth of April, eighteen sixty-five. The day Abraham Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater. That same day I learned the worst—the South had lost the war. Lee had turned his sword over to Grant at Appomattox courthouse on April ninth. So the silver bullion my fellow Rebs died trying to bring East would have been too late to help the Confederacy."

Vanhorne got to his feet and paced around his cell a couple of times. "Hallucinations," LeBeck was thinking. "Delusions of grandeur. This waiting to hang has deranged the old man."

Suddenly Vanhorne wheeled to face LeBeck, as if he had come to a decision.

"Doctor, I've never breathed this to a soul—but that bullion is still in the brasada, somewhere within a day's ride of this very jail!" the old wardog said in sepulchral tones. "My ordeal did something to my memory, like amnesia. In all the years I've knocked around Border saloons, gambling for a living, I was unable to recall Colonel Cushman's bearings on the location of that *brea* pit. Then, last winter, I had a bout with pneumonia. Raved in delirium for days. When I recovered, my memory was as clear as crystal. I could hear the Colonel making me memorize those latitude and longitude readings, plain as if I was talkin' to him."

LeBeck yawned, believing none of this. Vanhorne went on in a voice like some-

thing from an opened tomb:

"That's why I come out here to the Nueces, s o o n as I got the strength to travel. I was the only soul on earth, includin' Injuns, who knew the secret of where that half million in Comstock silver was cached." The old man grinned ruefully. "And what did I do? Got intoxicated on pulque-brewed Mex likker. Knifed a stable hand. And here I am, due to stretch hemp in the mornin'."

LeBeck ran splayed fingers through his shock of cotton-white hair. "A dramatic story indeed, Major," he said drowsily. "An especially interesting s t o r y for a medical man to hear. But why tell it to me?"

Vanhorne seated himself alongside the chessboard, his eyes burning like a maniac's as he stared at the pock-pitted face of the surgeon-turned-bandit in the adjoining cell.

"You say there's one chance in a thousand you may be rescued, Doctor. Me, I got nothin' to lose by sharin' my secret. So I'm going to tell you where that tar pit is. Unless you take me for a loco old fool who's stringin' you along for the josh of it, you will try to recover that treasure if you ever get a chance."

LEBECK flexed his fingers, the long, sensitive, tapering fingers of a master surgeon. He was bored, but hid that fact.

"You wrong me, Major," he said. "I asure you I do not consider you either loco or a prevaricator."

The old man in the next cell looked relieved. Leaning closer to the bars, he whispered:

"Memorize this, Doctor. No—better write it down. It might slip your memory, like it did mine."

Vanhorne fished in a pocket of his brass-buttoned coat and handed LeBeck a stub of pencil.

"Here—write it down. That tarpit is located at Latitude twenty-eight degrees, seventeen minutes, six seconds North, right smack on the hundredth meridian of Longitude West of Greenwich. Got that?"

LeBeck, to keep from offending the old man, jotted down the cryptic figures on the grimy cuff of his starched shirt sleeve. He patiently double-checked their accuracy as Major Vanhorne repeated the bearings.

"Thank you," LeBeck said, humoring the demented old codger. "If I live to dig up this brasada bullion of yours, Major, I'll buy a bottle of Napoleon and toast your memory . . . Now, how about resuming our chess competition? I believe your strategy is based on the difficult Falkbeer counter gambit, is it not?"

CHAPTER V

Wrong Fork of the Trail

SUNDOWN had come to Cascabel when Jim Hatfield roused himself in the back room of Sheriff Payne's home, mentally and physically refreshed after his day-long sleep. Washing up in the bowl with which the sheriff's daughter had provided him, the Ranger presented himself in the kitchen where Nita Payne was preparing supper for him and her father. He found his friend, the sheriff, sitting at the table, idly drumming his nails.

"Dad won't eat a bite this evening, Jim," Nita said, after she had greeted her father's guest. "Hangings always upset him, especially when the victim is a likable old duffer like this Major Vanhorne."

Nita Payne, in her early twenties, was a lovely girl with Irish blue eyes and the gleaming raven-black hair that went with them. The rounded curves of her young body were not concealed by the simple calico dress and frilled apron she wore.

She looked even more beautiful than Hatfield remembered her at breakfast, and something about her healthy simplicity and good humor put a tug in the Lone Wolf's heart, reminding him that as long as he wore the star of a Texas Ranger, romance with a lovely girl like Nita

Payne was out of the question. A man engaged in the most hazardous occupation known to the West had no right to claim a girl's love.

"I know exactly how your dad feels, Nita," Hatfield said gravely. "Taking the life of a human being is no easy thing to do, even in carrying out the law. I know. That unfortunate duty has been mine too many times in the past."

Sheriff Payne looked up, as if just reminded of something. Fishing in his vest pocket he pulled out a folded sheet of yellow paper.

"Answer to your telegrams, Jim," he said, handing the form to his guest. "The operator jotted 'em both down on the same paper, seein' as how they arrived within minutes of each other. He delivered 'em to the jail office just as I was takin' Vanhorne and LeBeck their supper trays this evenin'."

Hatfield carried the paper over to the glare of a hobnail oil lamp on the dining table. The first message was from his own chief, Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell of Ranger headquarters in Austin:

GLAD TO KNOW YOU SUCCEEDED IN CAPTURING LEBECK. REPORT BACK TO AUSTIN IMMEDIATELY UPON TURNING PRISONER OVER TO PROPER AUTHORITY. HAVE A CASE LINED UP FOR YOU DOWN GALVESTON WAY.

Hatfield grinned. Cap'n Bill rarely gave his ace Ranger any rest between assignments. More often than not, McDowell considered each new case a suicide assignment, one which only Hatfield was deemed capable of handling. This new case down on the Gulf coast would probably prove to be no exception.

The second message was of more direct interest to him. It was from the Commandant of the Army garrison at Fort Encinal, and it read:

NEWS OF LEBECK'S CAPTURE RELAYED THIS OFFICE FROM FORT REILLY KANSAS. HAVE DISPATCHED CAPTAIN BENJAMIN NORTH TO CASCABEL TO TAKE LEBECK INTO CUSTODY. NORTH SHOULD ARRIVE CASCABEL ON MORNING STAGE JUNE ELEVEN. THE ARMY CONGRATULATES YOU ON CAPTURE OF LEBECK AND PARTIAL RECOVERY MISSING PAYROLL.

Hatfield pocketed the telegram and turned to face Nita and her father. A real regret was in his voice as he told them:

"My visit with you will be a short one, I'm afraid. A Captain North gets here on tomorrow morning's stage to pick up the prisoner. And my chief wants me to return to Austin at once."

Disappointment showed on the faces of his host and hostess. Both remembered with pleasure the Lone Wolf's last visit with them when he had been in Cascabel several years previously.

"That reminds me," Hatfield said. "One of my best friends lives on the trail between Cascabel and San Antone. If he's still there I should be able to drop in for a howdy on my way out. Old Stag Barrett —runs a cattle outfit north of the river, the Circle B. You know him, Sheriff?"

OLD PAYNE winked at his daughter, and Hatfield was surprised to see the girl flush.

"Know old Barrett?" the sheriff repeated. "Ought to, seein' as how my little girl is engaged to marry his nephew, Bob Hilmar."

A grin broke the Ranger's face as he stared at Nita. He had not heard of her betrothal to his old friend's nephew.

"I'm mighty happy for you, Nita," Hatfield said. "I remember Bob Hilmar. Fine boy. Still in short pants last time I saw him."

Nita laughed coyly. "Bob's a strapping six-footer now—he'll be twenty-six next summer," she said. "As a matter of fact, Uncle Stag plans to retire and turn over the Circle B to Bob when we get married."

During the meal which followed, Hatfield did his best to get the old sheriff's mind off tomorrow morning's hanging. As they were finishing up the delicious gooseberry pie which Nita had baked in Hatfield's honor, the sheriff thought of something.

"Forgot to tell you that an hombre dropped by the jail this afternoon to pick up that gunnysack of shootin' irons you left with me this mornin', Jim. Rough-lookin' codger callin' hisself Voyd Ro-

mane. Had a shifty-eyed half-breed with him, forkin' S Bar H ponies."

Hatfield nodded. "LeBeck was at their camp when I ran him down last night. Far as I could make out they weren't companeros of LeBeck's, so I didn't bring them in with me. Took their guns to make sure they didn't try to make a play for that *dinero* LeBeck was carrying."

The sheriff grinned. "Well, I give 'em their guns, like you left instructions to do. Harmless saddle bums, most likely. S Bar H is a brasada outfit over in the next county run by a Swede name of Hjelmquist. Does his tradin' here in Cascabel."

Hatfield retired early that evening, knowing his chance for a long uninterrupted sleep might not come soon again. He was astonished upon awakening the next morning to find the sun two hours high above the brasada wilderness.

Nita had breakfast waiting for him. She greeted the Ranger soberly.

"Well," she said, "Major Vanhorne went to the gallows like a man, at dawn. I imagine Dad will get drunk today. He usually does when he has to hang a man."

Hatfield glanced at the clock on a kitchen shelf.

"When is the morning stage due? I'm expecting Captain North on it, you know. Got to be on hand to turn Doc LeBeck over to the Army."

"It'll be here in thirty minutes," Nita answered. "You'll be leaving for Austin right away, I suppose."

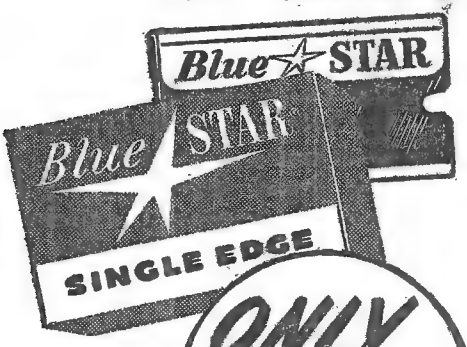
He nodded. "Afraid I'll have to, Nita—much as I'd like to stick around and enjoy some more of your sumptuous cooking."

The girl flushed. She was thoroughly charming when she was flustered over some compliment. Hatfield thought, "Bob Hilmar is lucky."

"Jim," Nita said carefully, "you plan to drop in at the Circle B on your way north, don't you?"

[*Turn page*]

A DIME BUYS A DOLLAR'S WORTH OF *SHAVING PLEASURE!*



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"Sure," the Lone Wolf said. "I wouldn't miss this chance to tell young Hilmar how lucky he is, slapping his brand on a girl as beautiful and winsome as you, Nita."

Nita avoided his glance. "Dad says I can ride north with you, if you don't mind. Bob and Uncle Stag are pretty busy this time of year. I don't get to see Bob often."

Hatfield shoved back his chair and reached for his hat.

"I'd be plumb happy indeed to have you for company, Nita," he said with obvious sincerity. "Right now I'd better get over to the stage office and make ready to meet this Army captain."

Half an hour later, Jim Hatfield was shaking hands with the iron-gray Army officer, Benjamin North, who would take over the responsibility of riding herd on Doc LeBeck and his stolen army pay-roll from now on.

FROM the stage office Hatfield directed Captain North to the jail where Doc LeBeck was now the solitary prisoner in Sheriff Payne's custody. Gravediggers were already at work preparing a last resting place for old Major Vanhorne, who had died at dawn on the Cascabel gallows.

"The sheriff will turn LeBeck's pay-roll loot over to you when you're ready to leave, Captain," Hatfield said.

Captain North smiled grimly. "I'm afraid the next stage out of Cascabel won't be until tomorrow, Mr. Hatfield. LeBeck will have to spend another night in this calaboose."

After thanking the sheriff for his hospitality and bidding his old friend goodby, Hatfield went to the stable to saddle Goldy. When he returned to the Payne home on the north edge of town, Nita was waiting for him, mounted on a leggy bay mustang. She was decked out in a split-type doeskin riding skirt, apricot-colored rodeo blouse, and a cream-white Stetson. Lashed behind her cantle was a basket of Mexican manufacture known as a *maguay canasta,* in which the girl had packed a picnic lunch for them to eat en route to Stag Barrett's Circle B Ranch.

Leaving Cascabel, they crossed the Nueces by way of the stagecoach bridge and headed along a wagon road leading north. They cut through the thick of the thorny jungle of brasada. Time passed quickly for the Lone Wolf, chatting with Nita regarding her wedding plans, and it was with real surprise that Hatfield found by consulting his watch that it was two o'clock in the afternoon.

They had reached a fork in the road near a bubbling spring, as good a spot as any for Nita's picnic dinner. By the time they were ready to ride again it was three o'clock and the sun was well westered down the Texas sky.

"Which fork of the trail takes us to the Circle B?" Hatfield wanted to know, as he helped the girl into saddle.

"The road to the left is the way Bob and Uncle Stag travel with wagons," Nita said, "but I remember Bob said this fork on the right is a short-cut if you're on horseback."

Swinging into stirrups, Hatfield reined his golden stallion into the right fork of the trail.

"Short-cut it is, then," he laughed, and they were soon lost in the perpetual twilight of the Texas thickets.

By the time they had traveled five miles, Hatfield began to have doubts as to the wisdom of taking this short-cut. So far as he could see, no rider had traveled this route in months. The wicked junco and spiny cactus closed in, making travel difficult for both horses and humans.

"Maybe—I was wrong," Nita confessed, when they found themselves fighting through a nearly impenetrable thicket of flowering agaritas. "Maybe that fork wasn't the one Bob told me about. Jim—I'm terribly sorry."

Hatfield reined up, surveying the roundabout jungle.

"It's no disgrace to get lost in the Texas brasada," he reassured the girl. "The best thing for us to do is cut back to that fork where we had the picnic lunch and keep to the wagon road. As it is, I'm afraid darkness will catch up with us before we reach Stag's ranch."

They swung back into the brush. It was nearly dark in these thickets, making it impossible to check their back track. Hatfield, whose sense of direction was usually infallible, suddenly realized that, for the first time in his career as a Ranger, he was completely lost. There was no way of telling the sun's direction, so thick was the overhanging growth. And although the brasada offered dozens of tunnel-like trails, made by animals, they soon found themselves going around in circles.

"Nita," Hatfield said sheepishly, "we're liable to be marooned overnight. No use wasting energy on these game trails. With more daylight, we'll know better what we're doing."

The girl reined her mustang alongside Hatfield's golden stallion, a tremor of dread running through her.

Suddenly, to their ears came an alien noise breaking the primeval silence of this vast thicket jungle. A sound of human voices, off to the right.

"We must be closer to the Circle B than we thought, Nita," Hatfield said. "Barrett is the only rancher in these parts, isn't he?"

Nita nodded, relief flowing through her in waves. Since early girlhood she had heard stories of how savage Indians and poisonous reptiles and predatory wolves roamed the thickets after dark. The prospect of being stranded overnight in this jungle, even with Hatfield to protect her, had been a frightening thing.

"The only other ranch in the vicinity is Sven Hjelmquist's S Bar H, twenty miles away," she said.

CHAPTER VI

Doomed Stage

FOLLOWING the sound of human voices, Hatfield led the way along a cactus-tangled trail. A strong odor of tar touched his nostrils as Goldy suddenly broke into the open and halted on the brink of a cliff overhanging a narrow canyon. The traces of an abandoned wagon road skirted the rimrock. The smell of tar was stronger here, an effluvium of oily asphalt that cloyed the nostrils.

The first thing that caught Hatfield's eye was a jumble of bleached bones on the rimrock wagon road before him—the skeletons of a team of mules. An army team, Hatfield deduced, for the corroded brass disks on the headstall of a mule's skull lying in the ignota weeds below Goldy's brisket were stamped with the Stars and Bars insignia of the Army of the Confederacy.

There was no trace of a wagon's wreckage behind the mule bones. Disaster of some kind had overtaken a military party here at some time in the past, during the Civil War period.

Nita reined up alongside Hatfield's stallion as the Ranger dismounted, handed her his reins, and picked his way across the bone-littered wagon road to stare down the canyon. A party of men wearing pith helmets and cotton trousers were busy excavating in what appeared to be a *brea* pit directly below, from whence came the heady odors of natural tar. The sight puzzled Hatfield, being out of place in this Western wilderness. On the far side of the asphalt deposit were pitched a couple of canvas tents.

From behind him, Hatfield heard Nita speak:

"Why, I know where we are now, Jim. This is the old tar pit on the east end of Uncle Stag's ranch. Those men are scientists from some big museum in New York. Uncle Stag has given them permission to dig for fossil remains—saber tooth tigers and mastodons and suchlike."

Staring at the archaeologists at work in the pit of the canyon, Hatfield grinned, sharing Nita's relief.

"It's a cinch they aren't Circle B cowpunchers," he said. "If this is the east corner of the Circle B, then all we've got to do is head west to reach Barrett's place. Is that it?"

The girl joined him at the cliff's brink,

leading the horses. The New York scientists down at the *brea* pit had stopped work now, having discovered the man and the girl skylined on the parapet of rock overhead and waited for them to make their way down.

"We'll ask Professor Bridewell—he's the one with the white goatee," Nita said. "They've got a trail leading to Uncle Stag's house. I think Bob told me the tar pit is only five miles from home. Jim, I'm —I'm awfully sorry I led you on this out-of-the-way trip."

Hatfield laughed. "Forget it," he said. "The best of trail blazers get lost, especially in this Texas brasada."

He laughed at her, and made a teasing remark which brought her quick flush and a laugh. . . .

At ten o'clock the following morning, Doc LeBeck peered through the bars of his cell in the Cascabel jail to see a red-and-yellow stagecoach rumble across the Nueces River bridge.

Some twenty minutes later, the bullpen door opened and two men came to LeBeck's cell—a gray-haired Army officer and a gaunt-faced man wearing a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Sheriff Payne's laid up with a broke leg," the deputy explained as he unlocked the cell. "He always goes on a drunk after he hangs a man, and yesterday he fell off the bridge and got hisself laid up for quite a spell to come."

LeBeck was staring at the Army officer in the background as he stepped from the cell.

"You should have called me," the prisoner said sarcastically. "I doubt if you have a medical practitioner in this town who could have set the good sheriff's leg with more skill than I."

The Army officer stepped forward. A pair of fetters hung from his left wrist. Reaching out, he snapped the other bracelet around LeBeck's right wrist.

"I'm Captain North, U.S. Army," he said bleakly. "I'm taking you and the pay-roll Ranger Hatfield recovered back to the guardhouse at Fort Encinal, LeBeck."

LeBECK made no comment as he was led into the front office, chained to the Army man. North picked up a leather case in which he had stowed the satchel of currency LeBeck had stolen up in Kansas a month previously. After instructing the deputy to convey his condolences to Sheriff Payne, he led his prisoner out of the jail.

An outgoing stage was waiting at the express depot, and shortly Doc LeBeck found himself inside the Concord, still handcuffed to the military guard. They were to be the only passengers, for a few minutes later the jehu mounted the boot and lashed the six-horse span of Morgans into a gallop.

Bracing himself on the leather-covered cushions, LeBeck tipped up a canvas dust curtain of the stage window at his elbow and peered out for his last look at the cowtown. In so doing he caught sight of two riders sitting their horses in front of a big mercantile store. Latigo Modesto and Voyd Romane!

Romane caught sight of LeBeck peering from the window of the passing stage and his hand lifted in a brief gesture. LeBeck settled himself back on the jouncing cushions, his shoulder striking Captain North's as the stage careened around a tight corner and rumbled over the plank bridge crossing the Nueces.

For the first time since his arrest by Jim Hatfield, Doc LeBeck drew an easy breath. Modesto and Romane had not deserted him in his hour of need. The fifty thousand in greenbacks was a powerful motive for outlaws like that pair, if not their loyalty to the outlaw surgeon who had once saved their lives.

Soon the Encinal-bound stage was racking its way along the thicket-bordered road, Captain North dozing at LeBeck's side. A big Army Colt was holstered to North's polished Sam Browne belt, his arm covering it. The leather pouch containing LeBeck's loot reposed on the floor of the stage between North's blunt-spurred cavalry boots.

An hour out of Cascabel the horses drawing the stagecoach slowed to a walk

as they pulled the vehicle up a long grade between beetling canyon walls. At the summit the driver halted the team for a blow.

It was semi-dark inside the curtained stagecoach, but Doc LeBeck was tensely alert. Lifting the canvas cover of the window at his side, he caught sight of two horsemen spurring out the dense *tepula* thickets to the left of the road. Romane and Modesto!

Sunlight flashed on naked gunmetal as the riders converged on the stage. LeBeck heard the grizzled reinsman atop the Concord growl a sharp oath, the instant before the quiet of the canyon was rudely breached by a double roar of guns.

Captain North came to his senses with a grunt of alarm as the roar of gunfire was followed by a thud of collapsing bodies up in the stage boot. Horses' hoofs churned abrasively on the canyon road as the two bushwhackers spurred in close, on either side of the stalled Concord.

Six-guns smashed deafeningly once more, and LeBeck heard the scream of a dying horse. His confederates had shot down the lead Morgans to prevent the team from stampeding.

"Hold-up!" Captain North yelled, and had his Army .45 out of leather instantly.

With a cold snarl, the pock-marked outlaw at his side reached out with his free hand to seize the barrel of North's pistol. The right-hand door of the stage swung open and North, grappling with LeBeck for possession of the six-shooter, saw the grim face of a half-breed Mexican peering into the stage.

It was Latigo Modesto. With a Spanish oath, the *mestizo* gunman thrust his Colt muzzle against the Army officer's temple and pulled trigger.

North slumped, dead instantly. LeBeck was breathing heavily as he wrested the Army pistol from the dead man's hand. The opposite door of the stage swung open and Voyd Romane peered into the Concord in time to see LeBeck lowering North's blood-drenched corpse into the space between the seats.

"Dead men don't talk," Romane chuckled. "Went off easy as shootin' fish in a barrel, Doc."

LeBECK made no answer until he had searched North's pockets and found a key to unlock the steel fetter which shackled him to the dead man. When he was free, he dragged the money-laden military pouch from under North's corpse, tossed it out the door to the grinning Modesto, and left the stage by the opposite side.

"Good work, men," LeBeck panted, thrusting North's gun into the waistband of his pants. "When I saw you weren't masked I knew you aimed to liquidate the stage crew."

Modesto and Romane had done a good grim job, LeBeck saw. The dead bodies of the express messenger and the stage driver lay huddled grotesquely atop the stage, their blood dripping into the dust. Two of the six horses in the team lay dead on the road, effectively anchoring the other Morgans.

"We got an extry horse waitin' for you back in the brush, Doc," Romane said, leading his S Bar H pony around behind the stage. Modesto had clambered on top of the Concord and, as Romane finished speaking, dragged the express box out on the roof and blew the padlock asunder with a well-placed shot.

A moment later the half-breed climbed to the ground and mounted his own horse.

"They weren't carryin' anything valuable this trip," Modesto said. "Well, *esta nada*. We got what we come after, eh, *compadre?*"

Leaving the corpse-guarded stage where it stood, the three outlaws headed into the *tepula* thicket. A few steps, and Doc LeBeck was climbing into the saddle of the chestnut gelding that was waiting for him there.

"Where do we go from here—strike out for the Rio as we planned to do before the redoubtable James Hatfield entered my life?" LeBeck drawled, mopping his smallpox-scarred face with a handkerchief.

"Got to pick up our own broncs at the Swede's place," Romane said. "You don't need to worry about spendin' tonight at the S Bar H outfit, Doc. Sven Hjelmquist is on the dodge as much as we are. Killed a faro banker in Del Rio a few years back and he's still packin' a bounty on his topknot."

By midafternoon the three owlhooters had reached the Nueces at a point well beyond the Cascabel settlement. Passing the scene of LeBeck's arrest by the Lone Wolf at the ford, they continued a few miles further into the brasada and finally arrived at a small cattle outfit in the heart of the thicket jungle which, LeBeck agreed, was made to order for an outlaw's retreat. The law would have difficulty in even locating the S Bar H, let alone identifying its Swedish owner as a wanted man.

Hjelmquist proved to be a raw-boned Scandinavian with pale blue eyes and hair that matched LeBeck's cottony mane. As night fell over the Nueces wilderness, Doc LeBeck and his two confederates joined their host in a Swedish meal which defied description. It seemed as out of place on this lost brasada cattle ranch to be eating *smorgasbord* as to have found an Eskimo sitting down to a Spanish repast.

Seated before a roaring fireplace which Sven Hjelmquist had lighted to dispel the evening chill, LeBeck let the tension ease in his great frame relax by slow degrees. It was still hard to believe that he had survived a brush with Jim Hatfield and was now free of that Ranger's grip.

"Aye had a break of goot luck this veek," the big Swede chuckled, lighting his meerschaum with a coal from the hearth. "Ven I first came to this place there vas a beeg skull op in the attic dot some cowpoy had dragged in out of the *brasada.* A prehistoric elephant's skull. So, ven I hear aboot this party of New York scientists exploring the tar pit over on Stag Barrett's place up the riffer, I load this skull in my vagon and show it to dese dudes. Vot happens? Dey pay me von hondort dollars for a hunk of bone."

DURING the Swede's chuckling recital, Doc LeBeck had been staring at his host like a man in a trance. Now, not joining the amused reaction of Modesto and Romane, the pock-marked surgeon leaned forward tensely in his cowhide chair.

"A tar pit, you say?"

"*Ja,* Doctor," Sven Hjelmquist responded. "Vot the Mexicans call a *brea* pit, you onderstand? Dese New Yorkers, they dig for fossils dis sommer over on the Circle B."

In the flickering firelight, LeBeck pulled back his coat sleeve and stared at the penciled figures he had copied there at the dictation of the ill-fated old Confederate soldier, Major Vanhorne, whom LeBeck had seen go to his death on the gallows outside the Cascabel jail yesterday morning at daybreak.

"Sven," LeBeck panted hoarsely, "do you have a map of Texas handy? It's fantastic, but—"

"*Ja,*" the Swedish outlaw said affably, rising and going into the next room. A few moments later he came back with two large maps from his desk, one a plat of Brasada County, the other a wall chart of the State of Texas.

CHAPTER VII

McDowell's Orders

ROMANE and Modesto stared at LeBeck as if they believed he had gone insane, as they saw the alacrity with which the doctor seized the two maps from the Swede's hands.

After a moment's examination of the Texas map, LeBeck looked up, his face rinsed with perspiration.

"It checks!" he said wildly. "Old Vanhorne's latitude and longitude bearings jibe exactly with this county. You say there is a tar pit on a ranch near here, Hjelmquist?"

The Swede scratched in his close-cropped white hair, his expression puzzled.

"*Ja*—there are many tar pits in the West, Doctor. Diss von I speak of iss not twendy mile up the Nueces from here, on Stag Barrett's Circle B Ranch."

Voyd Romane tugged the lobe of his ear and said half-humorously:

"What's got into you, Doc? You ain't interested in digging up prehistoric bones, are you?"

LeBeck settled back in his chair, poring over the plat of Brasada County. Clearly marked in a dead end canyon which jibed exactly with the geographical bearings Vanhorne had given him was an area labeled *"La Brea deposits."*

"Gentlemen," LeBeck said in a ghostly whisper, "I owe you my life. Therefore I am going to tell you the story I heard from the old man who died on the gallows at Cascabel yesterday. At the time he told me the tale, I thought he was demented, out of his mind, imagining things. But this business of a tar pit on Barrett's ranch is proof that Vanhorne was telling the truth. It's too much to pass off as a coincidence."

Latigo Modesto grinned uncertainly. "Have you been eating loco weed, Senor Doc?"

LeBeck grinned too, but his pock-riddled face was satanic in the dancing fireglow.

"Listen to a dead man's story," he said, "and draw your own conclusions."

By the time LeBeck had finished repeating Vanhorne's narrative of a platoon of Confederate soldiers massacred by Comanches in 1865, and how a Conestoga wagon laden with half a million dollars' worth of Comstock Lode silver had been dumped over a canyon wall into a tar pit somewhere in the *brasada* badlands of Texas, LeBeck had the full and fascinated attention of his audience.

When he had finished, Sven Hjelmquist was the first to break the awed silence that gripped the S Bar H ranchhouse.

"A man who iss about to stretch hangrope would not lie, my friends. I belief the Doctor has stumbled across a fortune."

"Do you know anything about the tragedy that gave Dead Soldiers ford its name, any of you?" LeBeck asked.

Romane rubbed his ear thoughtfully. "Only that Injuns jumped a passel of Johnny Rebs there in 'Sixty-five. Come to think of it, why would Confederate soldiers be out in this uncurried neck of Hades? That's always been a puzzler hereabouts. But as none of 'em was left alive, the story never come to light. Maybe Vanhorne was speakin' the truth, like Sven says."

LeBeck steepled his fingers, peering abstractly into the dying fire.

"There is only one tar pit mentioned on the county map," the outlaw physician commented finally. "I note that an old military road linking Fort Stockton with the eastern presidios of Texas flanks the canyon where this tar pit is located. Vanhorne's platoon convoying that Nevada silver could very well have used that old military road at the time of the massacre."

Latigo Modesto whispered hoarsely, "Any day, any hour may see thos' gringos from New York dig up a fortune in *plata blanca* instead of the fossils they are after, senores!"

LEBECK got to his feet, turning to face his three henchmen.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice vibrant with suppressed excitement, "I am a realist, a thoroughly practical man. Wild goose chases have never intrigued me, nor has any wild tale of treasure trove. But I keep thinking this: Major Vanhorne might have been mentally unbalanced, but an insane man could hardly imagine a geographical location involving detailed longitude and latitude bearings which appear to tally with a known tar pit. I believe we should tarry long enough to investigate Vanhorne's fanciful account of a bullion cache."

Romane slapped his knee.

"We're with you, Doc," the Rio Grande rustler whispered with fierce emphasis.

"Though stakin' out our claim on that tar pit will mean buckin' those New York scientists and mebbe drygulchin' Stag Barrett in order to work on his Circle B range."

LeBeck smiled malevolently. "The potential rewards will justify any violence necessary," he murmured. "We will ride over to Barrett's ranch tomorrow and size up this tar pit, gentlemen."

Twelve days elapsed before Ranger Jim Hatfield reached the Texas capitol city of Austin. He had tarried only overnight at the Circle B home of his friend Stag Barrett, down in the *brasada* country of the Nueces, just long enough to give his congratulations to his old friend's nephew, Bob Hilmar, on his forthcoming marriage to Nita Payne.

In San Antonio he had been delayed by Goldy developing a lame hoof. But the magnificent golden stallion was back in the pink of condition when Hatfield finally arrived at the Ranger headquarters and had a long-suffering clerk in the reception room announce his arrival to his superior, far-famed Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell.

Hatfield chuckled as he heard the old lawman's explosive voice issue from the inner sanctum as he spoke to his clerk.

"Blast it, you ninny, you know I been expecting that starpacker of mine for a week. Tell him to rattle his hocks in here. And I don't want to be disturbed until I'm through with him, understand?"

Hatfield removed his Stetson as he ducked under the six-foot lintel and lifted a lazy salute to the grizzled old Ranger boss seated behind his littered desk. In McDowell's hands lay the responsibility for maintaining law and order in a large portion of the nearly 270,000 square miles which comprised the 254 counties of the State of Texas. It was a staggering load for a man to bear, considering how few were his law enforcement officers. But McDowell was a postgraduate of the gunsmoke and trail dust school, and only advancing age had taken him out of a saddle and put him behind an executive desk.

The old lawman's fierce countenance softened perceptibly as he stood up and shook hands with his favorite Ranger. A close camaraderie existed between these two. Such a rapport had to be, for McDowell was repeatedly called upon, in the line of duty, to dispatch the Lone Wolf Ranger on assignments from which it seemed humanly impossible that he could return.

But Hatfield had the priceless assets of an iron stamina and deadly accurate marksmanship to back up his likeable personality and better-than-average intelligence. McDowell respected Hatfield as a deadly fighting machine who had dedicated his life to the bringing of law to the wild frontier, ignoring personal risks, and for that reason McDowell acquiesced to Hatfield's desire to work with a free hand in all his assignments, unimpeded by red tape or the jealous bickerings of lesser, but equally ambitious Rangers. From this had come his celebrated nickname, "Lone Wolf."

"Sorry I'm late," Hatfield apologized, accepting McDowell's invitation to sit down. He went on to explain the reasons back of his rather slow return from the Nueces country.

"Well, you did a good job in tracking down this Doc LeBeck jasper," Roaring Bill acknowledged. "But I wish you had salivated the son instead of bringing him in alive."

Hatfield shrugged. "I'm not a blood-hungry butcher, you know. Whenever possible I try to make my arrests without resorting to a shoot-out."

McDOWELL reared back in his office chair, lacing his arthritic fingers over an updrawn knee.

"It's anti-climactic to tell you this, Jim, after winding up a successful manhunt, but—LeBeck is still at large."

Hatfield jerked erect in his chair, his jaw sagging.

"LeBeck escaped from Army custody?"

McDowell nodded sourly. "Got the report just a couple of days ago. The Encinal stage failed to show up with Captain North and LeBeck. Investigation revealed

that the Captain as well as the driver and shotgun guard had been killed. No trace of LeBeck, but a deputy from Cascabel saw where two riders had jumped the stage."

Disappointment was a cruel needle in Hatfield as he realized his rigorous pursuit of the outlaw medico had been in vain. Suddenly a grim possibility presented itself to the Ranger.

"You say two riders rescued LeBeck? I wonder if that could have been Voyd Romane and Latigo Modesto, the hombres who were with LeBeck when I captured him. They knew he was carrying that pay-roll money—"

McDowell leaned forward and opened a desk drawer, taking out a yellow envelope bearing the printed indicia of the Texas Overland Telegraph Company.

"Before we discuss this case coming up in Galveston, Jim," Roaring Bill said, "I've got a long telegram—night letter—for you from Cascabel. By the way, did you know Sheriff Payne is laid up with a broken leg? But no, you wouldn't. It happened the day after you left Cascabel. Tough break of luck, because Payne is a competent man and he might have been able to have tracked down LeBeck for us."

Hatfield felt a genuine shock in hearing of his old friend's misfortune. At Payne's age, a broken leg would require weeks in the knitting.

Slitting open the envelope, Hatfield took out a long, tersely worded message. He noticed with surprise and a touch of concern that it was signed by Nita Payne, the sheriff's daughter.

Hatfield read the girl's message aloud to his chief:

JAMES HATFIELD,
c/o RANGER HEADQUARTERS,
AUSTIN, TEXAS.

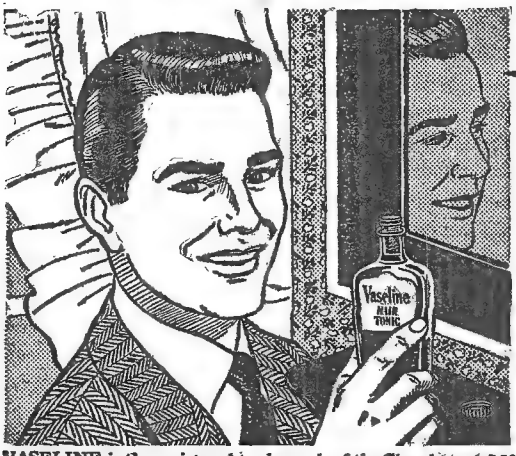
AM DESPERATELY WORRIED ABOUT THE SAFETY OF ROBERT HILMAR AND MY UNCLE, STAG BARRETT. THE DAY YOU LEFT FOR AUSTIN I RETURNED TO CASCABEL, AND WAS DISMAYED TO FIND MY FATHER WITH A BROKEN LEG.

BOB WAS TO HAVE COME TO CASCABEL THE FOLLOWING DAY TO PICK UP SUPPLIES. WHEN A WEEK PASSED AND HE DID NOT SHOW UP, I

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



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RODE OVER TO THE CIRCLE B RANCH.
I FOUND THE HOUSE IN POSSESSION OF MR. SVEN HJELMQUIST, THE SWEDE WHO OWNS THE S BAR H ADJOINING THE CIRCLE B. HE INFORMED ME THAT UNCLE STAG HAD SOLD THE RANCH TO HIM, AND PRODUCED A BILL OF SALE. I AM CONVINCED THAT THE DEED WAS A FORGERY. UNCLE STAG INTENDED TO GIVE THE CIRCLE B TO BOB WHEN WE GOT MARRIED. HE WOULDN'T HAVE SOLD OUT EXCEPT UNDER DURESS.
MR. HJELMQUIST SAID THAT UNCLE STAG AND BOB HAD GONE TO SAN ANTONIO TO DEPOSIT THE MONEY, BUT BECAUSE UNCLE STAG DEALS WITH THE CATTLEMAN'S BANK & TRUST HERE IN CASCABEL AND BOB WOULDN'T HAVE LEFT WITHOUT DROPPING ME A WORD. SOMETHING TERRIBLE MUST HAVE HAPPENED TO THEM.
DAD CANNOT INVESTIGATE BECAUSE HE WILL BE BEDRIDDEN FOR MONTHS. HE THINKS THIS IS OF DESPERATE IMPORTANCE AND ONE WE ARE JUSTIFIED IN CALLING TO THE ATTENTION OF THE TEXAS RANGERS. PLEASE HELP US.
NITA PAYNE

When Hatfield had finished reading the girl's message, dated only yesterday, his weathered face was drawn, and his eyes held a haunted gravity.

"Great Scott," McDowell whispered. "It sure looks like this lady friend of yours needs help, at that. But this Galveston business—" He hesitated.

Hatfield stood up, mopping his face with his neckerchief.

"Cap'n Bill," he said earnestly, "during all the years I've worked for you, I've always obeyed your orders without question. But this mystery down in Cascabel involves personal friends of mine. I've got to return to Cascabel, even if it means turning in my badge, Captain. That's how serious I take Nita's call for help."

McDowell let out one of the bull roars which had so fittingly given him his name. The haunted-looking clerk fairly fell into the room. The old lawman glowered at him.

"Send a message to Galveston," he growled. "Say Ranger Jim Hatfield will be unavoidably delayed in reaching the Gulf coast. I am assigning him to duty over in the *brasada* country."

When the clerk left, the two lawmen shook hands.

"Thanks, Cap'n," Hatfield said fervently. "Now I wish you'd telegraph Nita Payne that I'm on my way as fast as Goldy can take me. Only you'd better call me Jim Hayes, and don't sign your real name to that wire. I want to arrive in Cascabel incognito."

CHAPTER VIII

Mystery at the Circle B

UGLY brown clouds, a sandstorm sweeping out of the rugged Big Bend country to the westward, obscured the slim sickle of butter-yellow moon over the Nueces wilderness the night that Jim Hatfield returned to Cascabel. He was grateful for this bad weather, however, for it had driven men off the streets and made it possible for him to arrive in the cowtown without being seen by possible hostile eyes. Though he and his golden sorrel were so well-known throughout most of Texas he had reason to believe they were not known in this *brasada* settlement, which satisfied him. Because, for the job in hand, he wanted to work under cover.

A light glowed in the small frame house behind the rose-covered picket fence where Nita Payne lived with her sheriff father. Hatfield turned Goldy into the Payne's stable. His friends' first inkling of his arrival from Austin was when Nita opened the back door to his knock.

"Jim—oh, Jim!" she cried, throwing her arms about his neck and kissing him fervently on the cheek, "I knew you'd come! I knew you'd come as quickly as was humanly possible, too, but it has seemed like an eternity!"

The big Ranger stepped into the Payne kitchen and closed the door against the gritty assault of the storm raging outside. He shook a cascade of soda and alkali dust from his shirt and Stetson, looking down at the girl.

Grief and suspense that had left their mark on Nita Payne's lovely young face told him the worst. She had received no news from Stag Barrett nor from her fiancé since dispatching her urgent message to Ranger headquarters.

"They're still missing?" he asked bluntly.

She led him toward her father's room.

"Not a scrap of news, Jim," she said. "I'm sure that awful Hjelmquist must have killed both of them! I've known for a long time that that Swede wanted to buy the Circle B, but—"

Hatfield stepped into the lamplighted bedroom where grizzled old Wes Payne lay propped up in a four-poster bed, a family Bible lying open to the Psalms on the bedside table.

"How come you to have a broken leg, you old mossyhorn?" Hatfield scoffed.

Sheriff Payne sheepishly explained how he had taken one drink too many, trying to blot out the memory of Major Vanhorne's hanging, and had fallen off the bridge into the rocky edge of the Nueces River, snapping his left lemur like a dry wand of ocotillo.

"It's a heck of a time to be laid up, Jim," the old lawman said dispiritedly, "what with that Doc LeBeck escaping before he left my county, and now this mystery out at the Circle B. That's a plumb serious thing, Jim. I warn you to go easy when you ride out to Barrett's ranch tomorrow."

Hatfield sat down beside his old friend's bed, gripping Payne's gnarled fist.

"I realize that," he said. "Anything to go on? Does this Swedish rancher have a criminal record? Is he an outlaw? Any reason to believe he might have done away with Stag and Bob?"

Out in the kitchen, Hatfield could hear Nita busy preparing supper. The old sheriff shook his head.

"Not a lot known about Hjelmquist hereabouts," he admitted. "He first showed up a few years back after he had bought out the old Johnson ranch on the far side of the river. He's big and tough and block-headed and stingy, but he don't strike me as the kind of feller to ambush a neighbor. He'd never had any quarrel with Barrett or Bob. But he's lyin' in his teeth when he says he bought the Circle B, Jim, and you can stake your last blue chip on that. Besides, why should Stag and the young feller, who's aimin' to marry my girl just drop into nowhere this way? I ain't told Nita this, broken-hearted like she is, but between you and me, Jim, I don't think we'll ever see Stag or young Hilmar alive."

Nita appeared in the doorway, summoning Hatfield to supper.

"I'll see what I can find out," he promised the sheriff, "first thing tomorrow. You get some sleep. *'Noches.*"

BEFORE dawn the next day, Hatfield slipped out of the house without awakening Nita or her father, saddled Goldy and hit the wagon road leading north toward the Circle B Ranch.

When he reached the water-hole where the trail forked, he was sorely tempted to take the right-hand trail which had led him and Nita to the old tar pit at the east end of Barrett's range, so as to approach Hjelmquist's headquarters from the rear. But he decided against that.

It was probably best to approach directly from the front. And he was prepared. His Ranger badge was secreted in a compartment in one of his kangaroo leather cowboots, and there was nothing else about his appearance to indicate that he was a lawman.

He would ride up to the Circle B ranch house in broad daylight, posing as a friend of Barrett's riding through the country on his way to the Panhandle. Hjelmquist had never seen him or his golden stallion. And while he talked with the Swedish cattleman, he would have a chance to size up the layout for whatever was to be seen.

Continuing northward on the wagon road, by the middle of the morning Hatfield reached the drift fence marking the boundary between the Circle B and the S Bar H Ranch. Off to the southeast was the mouth of the low-walled canyon at the blind end of which the New York scientists were excavating a tar pit for prehistoric fossil remains. Straight ahead, northward, the road continued along the boundary fence toward the natural spring where old Stag Barrett had built his ranch headquarters.

A pair of collie dogs which Hatfield recognized as being pets of the missing Bob Hilmar's came frisking out to greet him

with friendly barks as Hatfield came in sight of the neat adobe barns and outbuildings of the Circle B.

Seeing those dogs added to Hatfield's unease. He knew that Hilmar had raised those collies from pups, knew how much the young waddy loved them. If Hilmar had gone to San Antonio with his uncle, as Hjelmquist claimed, he would certainly have taken Spiffy and Toby with him, or else have left them in Nita's care.

Hatfield saw no one around the ranch as he cantered up to the mesquite pole fence which surrounded the cottonwood grove by the springs. In the shade of those trees Stag and Bob had built the home which Nita Payne was to have occupied as a bride.

Then the Ranger saw a blue roan gelding, branded with the Swede's S Bar H iron, hitched to the front gate. Hjelmquist was probably that roan's rider as well as owner. If the Swede had added the Circle B to his range holdings he would spend at least part of his time away from the S Bar H, twenty-miles distant.

Dismounting at the gate, Hatfield ground-tied Goldy and trailed his spurs up the walk toward the cottonwood-shaded house. He was whistling a range tune, his face placid as befitted a roaming saddle tramp paying Circle B a casual call en route through the brasada country.

As he mounted the porch steps, the door opened. It revealed the powerfully-built figure of a blond, blue-eyed giant whose facial contours branded him as a Scandinavian, a rare type in Texas.

"Howdy," Hatfield drawled, hitching up his gun-belts. "Is Senor Barrett around this mornin'?"

The big man's eyes narrowed to twin slits as he sized up the ruggedly handsome young Texan before him.

"That depends," was the surly rejoinder. "Who might you be?"

Hatfield grinned disarmingly.

"Me? Oh, I'm Jim Hayes. Work up Amarillo way for X I T. Stag Barrett's an old pard of mine. Thought I'd look him up on my way up from the Rio Grande."

The big man in the doorway scrubbed knuckles across his glinting yellow stubble.

"*Ja,* Barrett is here," was his surprising answer. "Right now, he is asleep. Come on in. In yust a short vile I vill vake Stag up. I know he would like to see an old friend."

A PRESCIENCE of danger awaiting him in this house stirred the hackles on the Ranger's neck-nape. This man's assurance that the missing Stag Barrett was asleep in the house, at this hour of the morning, struck Hatfield as off-key.

"Who might you be, sir?" Hatfield inquired, casually dropping a hand to brush a low-slung six-gun butt as he stepped into the living room of Barrett's house. "Last word I had from Barrett, the only cowhand he had was a nephew named Hilmar."

The big Scandinavian closed the door and put his back to it. Hatfield's sweeping glance of the room revealed that it was empty.

"Aye am yust a no-account Svenska neighbor of Stag's," his host grinned. "My brand bane Hjelmquist—Sven Hjelmquist. I run the S Bar H outfit west of here."

Hjelmquist did not offer to shake hands. He gestured toward a horsehide sofa in front of the massive rock fireplace, where a few weeks before Hatfield had spent an evening chatting with Barrett and Hilmar and young Nita. The Swede headed that way.

Everything in this room seemed the same as before. So far Hjelmquist had made no suspicious move. He seemed completely at ease. At the moment he was punching a carved meerschaum pipe into a copper humidor on the mantel shelf which Hatfield recognized as a Christmas gift he had once sent old Barrett.

"Never knew old Stag to sleep this late," Hatfield remarked casually, reaching in his shirt pocket for Durham and cigarette papers. "Where's the kid, Bob Hilmar?"

Hjelmquist grinned enigmatically as he stoked his pipe and lighted up.

"Yust haff patience, Mr. Hayes. Stag has yust returned from a trip to San Antone and he iss tuckered out. Bob Hilmar? He didn't come back vith his uncle. Vy, I do not know."

As he curled a cigarette paper in his fingers and dusted flakes of tobacco into it, Hatfield's vivid greenish-gray eyes were sweeping casually over this room he knew so well, photographing every detail of it, trying to see something that was out of place, something that would account for the tocsin of warning that was tolling in the back of his brain, telling him that this Swedish rancher was playing some sort of sinister waiting game with him.

Hjelmquist had a big Bisley six-shooter strapped to his Gargantuan thigh. The haft of a bowie knife projected above one of his Coffeeville half-boots. Hatfield knew the phlegmatic-tempered Swede could be dangerous if aroused.

And then, in the act of cementing his smoke with a swipe of his tongue, Hatfield caught sight of something that sent an electric thrill through every fiber of his being.

Resting on a window ledge to the left of the fireplace, almost out of sight amidst a litter of old Cattlemen's Journals and other periodicals, was a small black leather satchel stamped with the gold initials *"LeB."*

Doc LeBeck's medical kit!

By no twitch of muscle or compression of lips did Hatfield betray the impact which this chance discovery made on his senses. He turned casually to face Hjelmquist at the opposite end of the fireplace, the big Swede now contentedly getting his pipe drawing.

This kitbag of LeBeck's might or might not still contain the Fort Reilly pay-roll loot. What mattered was that its presence in this ranchhouse living room proved that LeBeck had either been in this place recently, might still be on the premises, or else the two unknown riders who had killed three men to rescue him from the Encinal stagecoach had brought the satchel of loot here.

The last idea fitted perfectly with Hatfield's logical thinking-out of LeBeck's rescue from the custody of Captain North. Two men had been responsible for that, according to the clues which Sheriff Payne's deputy had uncovered. The only two men who had known of LeBeck's loot were Voyd Romane and Latigo Modesto, who had witnessed LeBeck's capture by Jim Hatfield at Dead Soldiers' Ford a few weeks ago. And by their own admission, Romane and Modesto worked for Sven Hjelmquist.

The Swede's unwinking, blue eyes were fixed on Hatfield now. What went on in Hjelmquist's brain?

Hatfield's hand dropped to his side, as if seeking a match in his chaps pocket to fire his cigarette. Instead, his fingers coiled around the checked walnut butt of his .45 Peacemaker and whipped it from holster, his thumb earing back the knurled hammer to full cock as he laid the Colt on a level pointing aimed at Hjelmquist's beefy torso.

The Swede stiffened, caught off guard by Hatfield's draw.

"Vot is the idea?" he demanded.

Hatfield smiled, edging his way along the lavarock hearth toward Hjelmquist.

"The idea," he said calmly, "is that I aim to find out where you got that little black leather satchel that's sitting over there on the window ledge. I want the truth, Hjelmquist. Otherwise you may find yourself under arrest for being an accessory to one or more killings!"

CHAPTER IX

At the Tar Pit

HJELMQUIST had regained his composure. He stared at the black bore of the six-shooter trained on his midriff without showing any visible concern.

"Now yust let me tell you somet'ing, my friend," the Swede said quietly. "You say your name is Jim Hayes?"

Hatfield scowled. "Who I am makes no difference. I want to know how that doctor's bag wound up here at Circle B."

Hjelmquist shrugged. "Vait a minute, my friend. Let us get somet'ing straightened out. You lie when you say your name is Hayes. You are a Texas Ranger named Jim Hatfield. The Lone Wolf, is that not so? And Nita Payne sent you here to find out vere is her intented hosbind and old Barrett, is dot right?"

Hatfield reached out to jerk Hjelmquist's six-gun from leather. Never having seen this leering Scandinavian before, he could not fathom where Hjelmquist had learned his identity. Unless—unless there was someone in this house who had seen him riding in this morning, and had tipped the Swede off to stall him along and cover up that person's escape.

"I'm Hatfield, all right," the Ranger admitted frostily. "But q u i t hedging. I know you have two cowhands working for your S Bar H who knew what the owner of that kitbag was carrying in it. Did Romane and Modesto kill Doc LeBeck in order to get hold of that bag?"

From the shadows at the rear of the room a steely voice broke the brittle silence before Hjelmquist could answer:

"I am very much alive, Hatfield. Unless you drop those firearms instantly I will cut you in two with this shotgun."

Without removing his guns from covering Hjelmquist, Jim Hatfield glanced around behind him.

Doc LeBeck stood in the doorway of old Stag Barrett's bedroom, a s a w e d off Greener jutting from hip level. The outlaw medico had shaved off his russet whiskers; otherwise he was the same suave, sinister man Hatfield had turned over to the custody of the martyred Captain North.

"I don't think you'll shoot, LeBeck," the Lone Wolf said, desperately stalling for time. "You know I can cut down your friend here—"

As he spoke, Hatfield flung himself flat down on the floor. Simultaneously LeBeck jerked triggers, and buckshot riddled the space which the Ranger's tall body had occupied a shaved instant before. The shotgun's blast peppered one corner of the room back of Hatfield, and the violence of the explosion told the Ranger that LeBeck had squeezed both triggers.

With grim precision the Ranger triggered his Peacemaker, driving a slug into the smudge of powdersmoke which blotted his view of LeBeck in the doorway. As he was coming to his knees he felt Hjelmquist's bulk l a n d on his shoulders like a ton of rocks, the Swede's mighty arms encircling him with the crushing ferocity of a grizzly's hug.

Hatfield rolled half over on his side, struggling furiously to release his arms from the Swede's constricting grasp. Hjelmquist scaled over two hundred pounds, solid bone and brawn, and he was fighting for his life, therefore doubly dangerous.

The sheer weight of the big rancher's bulk carried Hatfield around and he felt himself being shoved face downward against the cold ashes and charred logs in the fireplace. Hjelmquist was on his back now, striving to smother Hatfield in the ashes.

Holding his breath, the Lone Wolf lifted his left arm up along his shoulder and squeezed the trigger of the gun he had taken from the Swede, hoping to put a slug in the S Bar H man's brain and extricate himself from the bigger man's hold.

The flash of burning powder from the muzzle of the six-gun seared the flesh of Hjelmquist's cheek. The concussion ruptured the rancher's eardrum, bringing a seep of blood leaking from that ear.

HOWLING with agony, Hjelmquist got his big boots planted solidly on the hearthstones and reared erect, pulling Hatfield up with him. With his arms locked against his sides, it was impossible for the Ranger to employ his six-guns effectively. Hjelmquist's great hands were locked in front of Hatfield's chest and nothing short of a bullet would break that grip. The Swede knew his

one chance for survival was to maintain the advantage he now held.

Mouthing Scandinavian oaths, Hjlemquist lunged forward, smashing Hatfield's forehead against the rock front of the fireplace. Blood spilled down from Hatfield's lacerated brow, blinding him momentarily.

Lifting his legs completely off the fireplace ledge, Hatfield doubled up his knees and, placing both spike-heeled cowboots against the arched keystone of the fireplace, shoved backwards with all his strength.

The counter maneuver put Hjelmquist off balance. He fell backwards, and through the b l o o d and soot which clogged his eyes Hatfield saw the heavy beamed ceiling overhead as the Swede crashed heavily on the floor, with Hatfield on top of him.

The blow stunned Hjelmquist, for Hatfield felt the Swede's iron grip on his torso yield. With a desperate twisting motion of his body, Hatfield got his arms free at last of Hjelmquist's locked arms.

Lashing behind him with both gun-filled hands, Hatfield hammered the Swede's skull with Colt barrels until he felt the last resistance leave the great bearlike arms which gripped him. As Hatfield struggled to rise, his half-blinded eyes got a fleeting glimpse of Doc LeBeck lunging in from the direction of the bedroom, swinging the sawed-off Greener like a bludgeon.

He tried to lift his guns for a point-blank shot at the oncoming outlaw, but LeBeck was coming in too rapidly for him. Hatfield's last conscious thought was a puzzled one: "Why doesn't LeBeck shoot me down?"

Then LeBeck's down-clubbing shotgun smashed the Texas Ranger on the skull. Fireworks exploded in Hatfield's brain. He seemed to be spinning around and around in a black maelstrom of pain. Then he was drawn down into a black funnel of oblivion and he knew no more. . . .

Blinding sunshine was in the Ranger's eyes when his senses rallied out of the Stygian tunnel. His eyelashes were sticky with clotted blood, his only indication that he had been knocked out. Then, as consciousness fully returned and his brain became rational again, Hatfield discovered that he was on a saddle horse —his own golden sorrel.

He attempted to drag a hand across his eyes, only to find that his arms were roped to his saddle-horn. As coherence returned slowly, bringing with it the agony of his b r u i s e d skull which throbbed as if a red-hot hammer were pounding his head with every beat of his heart, Jim Hatfield became aware of men's voices somewhere in the near distance.

"I vould as leaf wrassle vith a cougar, Doc," Hjelmquist's voice was saying. "Vy did not you shoot this Ranger ven you had the chance, eh?"

The oily, guttural voice of Doc LeBeck answered the S w e d e: "Hatfield is a husky specimen, Sven. We need manpower, don't we? There will be time enough to dispose of Senor Hatfield when we are finished with him. He will die with the others—a human sacrifice to that bubbling tar pit, along with our other prisoners."

Hatfield blinked and stared around. He was boxed in on either side by his two captors. LeBeck was riding the blue S Bar H horse the Ranger had seen waiting in front of Barrett's ranch house upon his arrival. Hjelmquist was flanking his right stirrup on board a powerful *grulla* mare taken from the Circle B cavvy, a mount which Hatfield recognized as belonging to Bob Hilmar.

"He's rallied around," LeBeck said. "I was afraid I might have clubbed him too hard, in the confusion of the moment. Hatfield would be of little use to us if he had suffered a severe concussion."

THE Ranger put his attention on the surrounding landscape. His captors were leading him down a narrow trail, barely wide enough to have accommodated a wagon, between low canyon walls. The sun, a blazing disc directly

overhead, announced high noon. Hatfield knew now that he had been out for at least two hours.

The reddish walls of this canyon looked familiar to Hatfield. Trying to make his memory function, he believed he knew where he was being taken. This was the twisting *barranca* which ended in a blind box, the site of the asphalt deposits which he and Nita Payne had accidentally discovered from the level of the *brasada* above the south wall of the canyon.

Both his captors showed the results of Hatfield's brief but desperate fight for his life. Hjelmquist's face was gashed and bloody from the hammering of Hatfield's gun muzzles. Several of the lacerations were bandaged and medicated, proof that Doc LeBeck had given his Swedish henchman medical attention.

LeBeck had not escaped unscathed. He had stripped his coat off and his left forearm was bandaged. The bullet Hatfield had driven into the shotgun smoke had not missed its mark, then.

The three riders turned an elbow angle of the shallow canyon and were confronted by a barricade of logs, a fence thrown across the road. A familiar figure in a ball-tasseled Chihuahua sombrero and a grimy serape was perched on the top rail, a rifle across his knees. It was Latigo Modesto. The rifle was one of the guns Hatfield had taken from the *mestizo* that night at the *Los Soldados Muertos* ford on the Nueces, and had taken with him to Cascabel.

The meaning of all this was beyond Hatfield. Of only one thing he was sure. For some unexplained reason Hjelmquist was working in league with Doc LeBeck, so the half-breed Modesto and the blond giant Voyd Romane, must also be close to the outlaw medico's.

Modesto grinned in surprise as he recognized the hogtied prisoner LeBeck and the Swede were bringing down the canyon. Leaping down from the fence, Modesto opened a gate to let the three horsemen pass.

"Senor Rangero, thees ees an onexpected pleasure, *es verdad,*" the half-breed jeered at Hatfield rode past. "The time weel come when you weel be sorry you caught up weeth *El Medico* LeBeck, *si!*"

Fifty yards beyond the fence where Modesto was posted on guard, the canyon reached its box end. The bituminous odor of the *brea* deposits cloyed Hatfield's nostrils now.

His eyes drew into focus on the scene he and Nita had witnessed from the nearby rimrock, weeks ago. The two tents of the New York archeological expedition still stood where he had seen them. But of the pitch-helmeted scientists, there was no visible trace now.

Hatfield's head spun. Why was he being brought to this tar pit? What lay back of LeBeck's enigmatical references to needing Hatfield to augment their manpower? What kind of project was the outlaw involved in, that required men to work for him?

Goldy halted, snorting nervously at the alien smell of the fuming bituminous deposits. Hatfield saw Hjelmquist and LeBeck dismount, felt a knife sever the rope which tied his ankles together under the sorrel's belly, then his hands were freed from the horn.

Dizzy with pain, Hatfield dismounted. He felt LeBeck's fingers dig into his left arm as the doctor guided him away from the horses, heading toward the tar pit.

Alarm really flooded Hatfield now. Back there along the canyon trail, just as he was recovering consciousness, LeBeck had said something about hurling him "and the others," whoever they might be, into the tar pit.

LeBeck halted, and Hatfield found himself staring down into an excavation in the center of the tar pit, a hole some ten feet deep and ten feet square, its walls shored up with planking to prevent the soft, viscid mass of natural tar from filling the hole.

FORMING a rough crescent under the overhanging cliffs at canyon's end, the *brea* deposit was some twenty

yards long by half as wide. To the left, the tar was stone-hard, dried to the toughness of an asphalt pavement by the milleniums that had elapsed since this bituminous flow first broke the earth's surface.

The right-hand end of the tar pit, by contrast, was still in a bubbling, smoking state of liquescence. It was from this newer and active portion of the asphalt well that the suffocating bituminous odors were coming.

But Hatfield's attention and interest were not on the physical aspects of this *brea* pond. They were on the human beings he saw. They were at work down in the plank-walled hole in the center of the deposit, where the tar was neither hot and liquid nor cold and brittle.

As the shadows of LeBeck and Jim Hatfield fell down into that shored-up excavation, the faces of the half-naked men toiling with buckets and shovels down there turned up to stare at them. A shocked exclamation escaped Hatfield's lips as he recognized most of those upturned faces.

There was his old friend Stag Barrett, his white locks now black with tar. At his shoulder, leaning on a shovel, was husky young Bob Hilmar, Nita's fiancé, the muscles of his back crisscrossed with scarlet welts which could only mean that the young cowpuncher had been recently and brutally flogged.

There were five other men down there with the Circle B boss and his nephew. Strangers to Hatfield, but men he recognized as the party of archaelogists he and Nita had seen working in this tar pit in search of prehistoric fossil remains.

CHAPTER X

Doom For Eight

ON THE far side of the open excavation a crude windlass had been rigged up out of logs, with a cable leading down into the pit. Manning that windlass, which Hatfield now realized was the machine by which asphalt was hoisted out of the deepening pit, was the straw-haired Voyd Romane.

"Another workman, *amigos*!" called out Doc LeBeck, stepping around behind Hatfield. "You can tell him what his duties are. Within a few hours he should be of material assistance to you."

Before Hatfield could move he felt the evil doctor's palms against his shoulder-blades. With a sharp push, LeBeck sent the Ranger plunging over the edge of the excavation.

Hatfield landed heavily on the asphalt floor of the hole, his hurtling body bowling over two of the New York scientists who had been unable to leap out of the way. Flat on his back, the blinding Texas sun pouring into the excavation, Hatfield opened his eyes to see the compassionate faces of Bob Hilmar and Stag Barrett bending over him.

"I would rather see you dead than with us in this slave-pit, Jim," the old Circle B cowman said hoarsely. "None of us will ever get out of this purgatory alive. You have joined the company of the damned, Jim. And what makes it worse is that I know you came into LeBeck's clutches because you were trying to find out what happened to Bob and me."

Badly winded by the jarring fall into the asphalt pit, Hatfield could do little to help himself as young Hilmar and his uncle hauled him over to one corner of the square excavation and propped him against the plank wall.

Staring dazedly about, Hatfield saw the five scientists busy shoveling up the glue-thick asphalt from the bottom of the pit and scraping it into a galvanized wash tub which Voyd Romane had lowered to them from the windlass overhead.

Romane's fiendish visage was peering down at them now, and as he saw the two Circle B men loosening Hatfield's shirt and restoring his Stetson to his head to shield the Ranger's bloody

scalp from the sun's heat, he shouted menacingly:

"Get to work, dang it! You ain't playin' nursemaid to that star-toter. You don't get a bite to eat until this tub is filled up."

A sense of growing horror mounted in Jim Hatfield as he saw Barrett and Hilmar leap to pick up their shovels and go to work. Obviously, they were in terror of Romane's guns.

This asphalt was difficult to handle with a shovel, more difficult in its semi-molten state than solid earth or broken rock would have been. The New Yorkers were working feverishly to get the tub loaded. All seven of the men down here were emaciated, and with scabbed welts on their bare backs showing where they had been whipped with a knotted rope.

When the tub was at last filled to overflowing, Voyd Romane started cranking the windlass drum hoisting the heavy mass of natural tar out of the hole.

This was not the area where Hatfield and Nita Payne had seen the New York archaelogists at work. At that time they had been digging in the older portion of the tar pit. Estimating the number of cubic yards of asphalt which had been removed to form this excavation, the Ranger shuddered at the toll of human muscle and energy it had taken for them now to be working this far from their original camp.

The New Yorkers dropped their shovels and squatted down, heads slumped, their eyes staring dully at Hatfield. This, then, must be the noon rest hour for Doc LeBeck's slaves.

Hilmar, a chestnut-haired young cowhand of twenty-five or thereabouts, came over to where Hatfield sat in the corner of the pit, trying to recover some of his strength.

"What is this?" the Ranger asked him hoarsely. "What happened?"

HILMAR'S eyes were on the paper label of the Durham sack hanging from the Ranger's shirt pocket. Sensing the waddy's need for tobacco, Hatfield handed over the sack and cigarette papers. For the first time, the New York scientists looked up with something like human emotion showing on their dead, fatigue-rutted faces. Swiftly Hilmar shaped a brown-paper cigarette and passed it back to one of them.

"Well," said Hilmar, "there's little enough I know. Only that when Uncle Stag and I were at breakfast one morning—it seems like a hundred years, but it must be only two weeks or so—we heard riders outside. It was our neighbor, Sven Hjelmquist, with Doc LeBeck—though we didn't know who he was at the time, of course—and Romane, the fiend who is handling the windlass, and a half-breed Mex named Modesto."

Hatfield nodded, waiting while Hilmar licked another quirly for him. However, much as he needed the stimulant himself, he handed the cigarette back to one of the New York scientists. They had broken the other cigarette in two and were drawing smoke from the stubs.

Old Barrett hunkered down before Hatfield. The Circle B boss was in his late 'sixties, lean as rawhide from a lifetime spent popping *ladinos* out of the Texas thickets. His natural strength had served him in good stead down here in the tar pit, since he could do his share of work and avoid torture.

"Like Bob was about to tell you, Jim," Barrett took up the narrative, "we didn't see anything suspicious about the Swede showing up with three other riders. But next thing we knew we were looking into their guns. They brought us down Tar Canyon and with LeBeck taking the lead, they rounded up Professor John Bridewell and the scientists who were digging up fossil remains from this *brea* hole. Before that day was gone, we had started digging this pit you find us in."

While Barrett was speaking, Bob Hilmar had finished supplying Professor Bridewell's scientists with smokes and was busy curling a cigarette for his uncle.

"But why—why?" Hatfield asked des-

pairingly. "LeBeck is a doctor, a wanted outlaw. Romane and Modesto are birds of a feather—Border riffraff, probably smugglers. And the Swede—he's a rancher. Why this making slaves of seven men and sinking this well in the ground? LeBeck can't believe that digging up mastodon bones or saber-toothed tiger remains can be profitable. It doesn't make sense."

Professor John Bridewell, a man of about Barrett's age, came crawling over to Hatfield's corner. His once-white imperial whiskers were matted with dirt and asphalt.

But he was the only one of this group of slaves who did not have whip-scars on his body.

"You are asking a question, young man, which has driven all seven of us out of our wits trying to answer," the New Yorker said bleakly. "It is not prehistoric remains that those arch-fiends up there are after. The second day we were at work here, we uncovered a prime specimen of the genus *Machaeodus,* or saber tooth tiger of the Eocene period, and a *Pogonodon* cat as large as a modern panther. Both specimens had become mired down in this asphaltum countless centuries ago, before the Great Ice Age. My museum would have found them priceless—scientifically speaking. But these beasts in human form chucked them to one side as if they were buffalo bones. No, Doctor LeBeck is not interested in prehistoric mammalia."

The Professor's long and erudite speech had told Hatfield nothing. Tar pits such as this one, lost in the heart of Texas, no doubt contained the fossilized remains of thousands of animals ranging in size from mice to elephants, and were therefore to be regarded, by archeologists, as living encyclopedias of knowledge. But it did not explain why an outlaw like Doc LeBeck or his henchmen should be enslaving these men to dig here.

"The only other possible value a tar pit could be to them," Hatfield mused, "Would be selling the asphalt for use in

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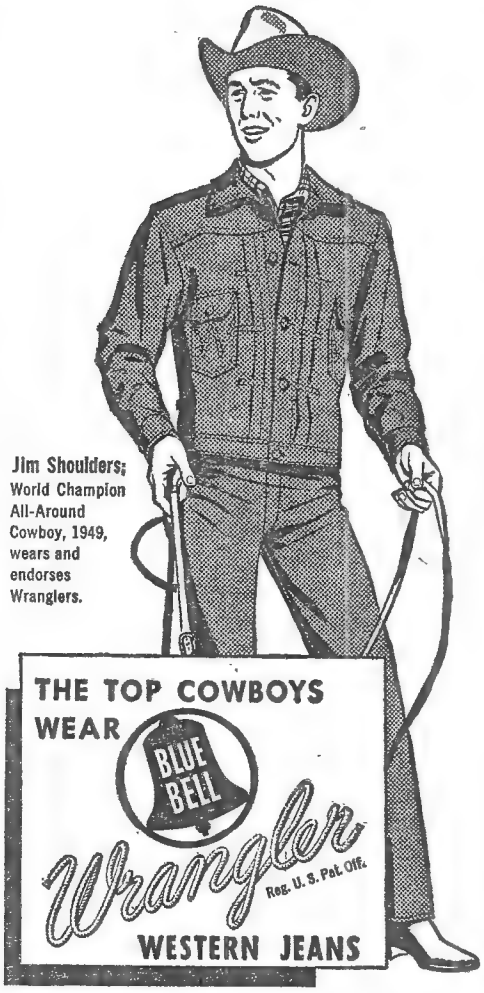
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paving roads. That's what they're doing with the tar pits over near Uvalde, I understand. There must be some other reason back of this monstrous outrage of LeBeck's."

PROFESSOR BRIDEWELL'S gnarled, tar-stained fingers shook as he drew on his cigarette.

"They took soundings in this tar with metal rods they brought out from the ranch—brace rods from a democrat wagon, Mr. Barrett here said. Yes, they *are* after something. But what it is, or what will happen to us when they find whatever it is they are seeking—"

The Professor broke off as Voyd Romane leaned over the top of the excavation. Sniffing the tobacco smoke which wafted up from the men below, anger stained Romane's face a mahogany hue.

"Smokes, eh? Toss that sack of Durham up here, Hilmar. You don't get a drop of water or a snack of bait till you do."

Muttering an oath, young Hilmar tossed Hatfield's sack of tobacco up to the leering outlaw.

Then Romane lowered the now-empty tar tub down into the pit. The reaction of the men astounded Hatfield. All of them, including Hilmar and Barrett, leaped for the tub as soon as it came within reach and snatched out of it a gallon jug of water and a single loaf of bread.

Hatfield stared aghast as the men clawed the bread into fragments and started stuffing it into their mouths. He realized then, with a pang of pity sweeping through him, that they were nearing the point of starvation. They were more animal than human.

It was Bob Hilmar who tore the water jug from the grasp of one of the New Yorkers and brought it over to Hatfield.

Parched with thirst though he was, the Ranger hesitated before drinking.

"How long does this water have to last, Bob?"

Hilmar grinned bleakly. "It's all we get until noon tomorrow, Jim."

Hatfield was shocked. "A gallon of water for seven men for twenty-four hours?"

"That's all we get. That and a loaf of soggy bread, once a day. Barely enough to keep us alive."

Hatfield took two swallows of the brackish water and handed the jug back to Hilmar. He saw it go the rounds of the other men. In a few moments it was empty.

Hilmar turned to the Ranger now, begging for news of Nita Payne. When Hatfield had explained the circumstances of his own capture, admitting that it was Nita who had brought him out from Austin to investigate the spurious sale of the Circle B, old Barrett said despondently:

"Yeah, I signed a bill o' sale. Got the hide larruped off my back before I finally did it. Knew Hjelmquist wanted that to show the sheriff, or anybody else who might wonder what the Swede was doin' holding down my ranch."

"Now that you'll turn up missing, Jim," Hilmar said heavily, "Nita is sure to go straight to Circle B. I'll go crazy wondering what those outlaws will do to her if—"

Hatfield got to his feet, his head aching painfully from the blow of the shotgun stock on his skull.

"Somehow the eight of us ought to manage a break," he said. "Where does LeBeck keep you at night? In those tents out in the canyon?"

Barrett shook his head, pointing at the floor of the pit.

"We spend our time down in this stinkin' tar hole, Jim. Romane and Modesto take turns through the night guardin' the canyon. We have no blankets, nothing for our comfort. That's why you'd have been luckier if LeBeck had shot you to death instead of bringing you here."

All further talk was broken up by Doc LeBeck's appearance at the rim of the excavation overhead.

"There'll be extra rations for the first

one of you who unearths a wagon wheel or any portion of a Conestoga wagon," the outlaw called down. "That's what we're after—a wagon. We have reason to think it sank in this portion of the tar deposit. To the first man who locates that wagon, I'll send down a sugar-cured ham and a bottle of wine!"

LeBeck vanished, leaving only the brassy Texas sky to echo his taunting laughter.

CHAPTER XI

Respite

BEWILDERED, the eight men stared at each other. The hot sun made black worms of molten tar leak through the cracks of the planks which LeBeck had provided to shore up the sides of the excavation and prevent the *brea* from filling the hole as fast as they dug it.

"Well," Professor Bridewell broke the silence, "at least we know what we're digging for. A wagon. A wagon." The scientist repeated the words several times, a sure sign in Hatfield's opinion that the brilliant New Yorker's mentality was beginning to crack under the intolerable strain.

Voyd Romane tossed another shovel down into the pit for Hatfield's use. Brandishing a bullwhip, the outlaw ordered surlily;

"All right—you've had your half hour break to rest. Get to diggin', buckos."

Throughout the remainder of that endless eternity of an afternoon, Jim Hatfield toiled with the others, digging gobs of sticky tar from the floor of the pit and scraping them into the tub. At one-hour intervals, when the tub was filled, Romane—and later on, Modesto—would hoist the tub to the ground level and empty it, giving them a ten-minute rest between tubs.

This was man-killing labor. The eight of them barely had room in which to work. But the threat of Romane's whip lash and his ever-watchful eye kept them digging, digging.

Shortly before sundown Romane and Modesto lowered sawed planks into the hole, to shore up the bottom of the excavation. Otherwise seeping tar from the outside would have nullified the fourteen inches of excavation they had accomplished during the day.

When it got too dark to work, Romane hauled up the tub for the last time. This signal that another day's toil was over caused the men to drop their shovels and sink to the floor, exhaustion claiming them.

Hatfield examined the sides of the plank shoring. Tar had oozed through the cracks, making it impossible to get hand-holds between the planks.

"How about letting me climb up on your shoulders, Bob," Hatfield suggested to young Hilmar, who alone of the seven appeared to be strong enough to support the Ranger. "I could reach the top plank, then—"

"No use, Jim," Hilmar said from the darkness. "I tried that the first night, when the hole was only three feet deep, tried crawlin' out. Modesto and Romane took turns lashin' me with a mulewhacker's whip. They keep this hole under steady guard."

Hatfield tried to make himself comfortable in one corner, an impossible task, since there was barely room enough for eight men to stretch out prone on the hard tar floor of the hole.

"Twenty-four hours from now," he thought, "my strength won't be half what it is tonight. If a break is to be made it's got to be tonight or never."

Hatfield drowsed off. He slept fitfully, nightmares ruining his rest. He awoke at midnight, hearing the exhausted snores of his fellow slaves. Overhead the Milky Way was beautifully bright in the sable sky of Texas. He could hear the soughing wind in the *brasada* jungle at the rim of the cliff overlooking the tar pit.

The Ranger got to his feet and, working in the gelid darkness, started to dig hand-holds between the plank walls, using the blade of his shovel. The tar was still plastic with daytime heat.

After an hour he had dug out grooves between the planks which enabled him to climb four feet up the wall. By stretching his arms upward, bracing his body on the shovel which he had wedged between two planks, he was able to reach a timber forming part of the windlass platform.

With infinite caution, the Ranger chinned himself upward until his head was outside the pit of doom. Moonlight showed him the floor of the canyon, its light glowing on the dirty canvas roofs of the twin tents fifty yards away. He saw no sign of a guard on duty.

The effort of pulling himself up until he could hook his elbows over the top timber made his bruised skull seem to split open. Hatfield was pulling his body over the brink of the pit when he saw a shadow disengage itself from the black background of the cliff and he saw the towering figure of the *mestizo,* Latigo Modesto, striding toward him.

MOONLIGHT flashed on the cartridges in Modesto's chest bandolier. He was dragging a bullwhip behind him, like the coils of some monster snake.

The half-breed's teeth flashed in a sadistic grin as he halted before Hatfield, clinging to the edge of the pit.

"I had hoped thees would happen, Senor Rangero," chuckled the outlaw, and lashed his whip at Hatfield's exposed face with all his force.

The leather thongs cut like knives as the whip spiraled around the Ranger's cheeks. He lost his grip and fell back into the pit, landing on one of the sleeping men with an impact which knocked the unfortunate man unconscious.

Frustration and despair at the failure of his escape attempt filled Hatfield now. He realized with crushing finality that the odds against them were insuperable. To admit defeat was completely foreign to Hatfield's nature, but only a fool could be optimistic in these circumstances.

Suddenly an idea occurred to the Ranger. Wiping at the warm blood which washed his cheek, Hatfield stared up at the silhouetted *mestizo* who stood up at the edge of the excavation, coiling his whip.

"Modesto," Hatfield called softly, so as not to awaken the men sleeping about him like hogs in a crowded sty, "you could collect quite a ransom from the State if you let Austin know I was being held. I'm willing to write a letter that would guarantee you perhaps ten thousand dollars in *oro,* if you will agree to spare the lives of these others when this job is finished."

It was a last-resort proposition. Hatfield was staking everything on the slim chance that this half-breed might be susceptible to bribery. But even this dim hope was short-lived.

"You try to buy your way out of thees trap, Senor Rangero?" Latigo Modesto laughed sadistically. "Senor, somewhere een thees *brea* peet is half a million dollars in seelver ingots, *sabe usted*? When we find eet, all of us weel be reech—and thees hole weel be your grave, Senor Hatfield, the grave for all eight of you, *si!*"

Shortly after daylight next morning, Jim Hatfield was roused by Bob Hilmar. He found the others already busy digging asphalt to fill the tub which Lloyd Romane had once more lowered from the windlass cable.

The first thing Hatfield noticed was that one of the New York scientists was missing from the group, leaving only seven to work the hole.

"Wayne McAllister was dead this morning," Bridewell explained. "He was our photographer and field clerk, unfit for hard physical labor. He died in his sleep and we sent his body up in the first tub. I think McAllister was lucky."

The clerk's death put a macabre mood on the others, a morbid acceptance of doom which had transmitted itself to Stag Barrett and young Hilmar.

Hatfield decided not to mention his unsuccessful attempt at climbing out of the hole last night. The fresh whip scars on his face were noticed by the others, but they asked no questions. To tell them of his whispered conversation with Modesto last night would only plunge them all deeper into despondency.

At ten o'clock, Doc LeBeck appeared at the excavation.

"We need a fresh wagon load of shoring planks," the outlaw called down to his haggard slaves. "Hatfield, you're the freshest man in the lot. Climb in the bucket and Romane will hoist you out of there. We'll have you load the wagon back at the ranch."

Fresh hope seemed to seize the others at this. With Hatfield on the outside, there was a chance he might be able to turn the tables on his captors. His powerful body had not yet been broken down by overwork and the whip and poor food, as was the case with the others, from rugged Bob Hilmar on down to the aged Professor Bridewell.

As Hatfield stepped into the empty tub and gripped the windlas rope, he whispered to the panting captives: "I'll do everything I can to get us out of this jackpot."

ROMANE and Modesto applied themselves to the windlass crank and shortly Hatfield stepped from the tub to the wooden curbing of the excavation. Doc LeBeck was on hand to shackle Hatfield's wrists with the Ranger's own handcuffs.

Glancing around, Hatfield beheld a gruesome sight. Over at the "hot end" of the asphalt deposit, where the tar was a fuming, semi-liquid mass, a dead man's legs protruded from the glossy black surface. The photographer, Wayne McAllister. The outlaws had chucked his corpse into the smoking quagmire, the easiest way of disposing of it.

A few yards from the tar pit, Sven Hjelmquist was waiting with a large wooden-sided hay wagon belonging to Barrett, drawn by Circle B horses. As LeBeck ushered Hatfield toward that wagon, the Ranger heard his golden sorrel whicker a greeting from a grassy patch beyond the two tents, where Goldy was picketed along with animals belonging to the Bridewell expedition.

LeBeck climbed into the hayrick along with Hatfield, and Hjelmquist whipped the team into a trot, heading down the canyon past the log barricade where Modesto was posted with a rifle to make sure no outsiders approached the asphalt diggings.

Hatfield's captor kept a six-gun ready, taking no chances on his prisoner attempting a break.

When the wagon arrived at Barrett's ranch an hour later, LeBeck jumped down and motioned Hatfield to follow. Keeping a gun drop on his prisoner, LeBeck cautiously unlocked one of the iron bracelets to give the Ranger the use of his hands.

"Load these planks on the wagon," LeBeck ordered. "This ought to be the last load of shoring lumber we'll be needing."

Hjelmquist had stopped the wagon beside a pile of whipsawed planks and light dimension lumber, which he recognized as the remains of the Circle B wagon shed and blacksmith shop.

Hjelmquist unhitched the team and turned the horses out in the corral behind Barrett's adobe barn, leaving Doc LeBeck to ride herd on Hatfield from the comfortable shade of a cottonwood tree a few yards away. The Swedish rancher did not return to the wagon. Hatfield, busy loading heavy planks into the haywagon, saw Hjelmquist vanish into the Barrett ranchhouse.

Hatfield had been working for two hours when his ears caught a rataplan of hoofbeats approaching the Circle B from the direction of Cascabel. He had stepped away from the lumber pile, hoping to get a glimpse of the oncoming rider when Doc LeBeck came running forward, brandishing his gun.

"Into the wagon, Hatfield!" LeBeck rasped hoarsely. "It won't do for either

of us to be seen by whoever that is riding in!"

Hatfield climbed wearily into the wagon and sat down on the planks he had loaded, LeBeck following him. Through the slats in the side of the hayrick he had a view of the road leading up to Circle B ranch yard, but knew the oncoming rider could not see the two men hidden in the wagon.

LeBeck, keeping a gun trained on Hatfield, rasped out in a sharp whisper: "Don't make a sound, Hatfield, or you'll draw a bullet in the middle. It's not a pleasant way to die."

Hatfield made no reply. At this instant, he caught sight of the rider rounding a bend in the Cascabel road.

Nita Payne! Bob Hilmar's worst fears were coming true this morning. The sheriff's daughter, alarmed at Hatfield's failure to return with a report from Circle B, had ridden out to investigate for herself.

Sweat boiled from Hatfield's pores as he watched the girl, in riding garb as she had been the day she and Hatfield had taken the wrong fork of the trail on their way to the Circle B, ride up to the front gate of Stag Barrett's ranch yard now and swing down from stirrups.

A feeling of utter helplessnes was in the Ranger as he saw Sven Hjelmquist emerge from the ranchhouse and walk out to meet the girl from Cascabel.

If he shouted a warning, he would not put it beyond the Swede to gun the girl down. It might be best for her to say what she had come to say to the Swede. Surely Hjelmquist would not be foolish enough to attempt to detain Sheriff Wes Payne's daughter here. If she failed to return to Cascabel, the bedridden lawman would send half the county as a posse to search for her north of the Nueces.

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CHAPTER XII

Nita at the Circle B

PEERING through a crack in the hayrick's side, Hatfield and LeBeck saw Hjelmquist and the girl engaged in earnest conversation. The distance was too great for them to overhear what was being said, but it was obvious that Nita Payne was seeking information concerning her missing fiancé and Stag Barrett, perhaps Hatfield as well.

After a few minutes of talking at the front gate, the girl followed Hjelmquist back into the ranchhouse. Dread put its acid taste on the Ranger's tongue as he pondered the Swede's purpose in inviting her inside.

LeBeck seemed to be sharing the Ranger's suspense. Once he muttered, "She can't find anything out here. But if that block-headed Swede holds her forcibly it'll force a showdown I don't want to have that happen just yet."

After an interminable wait, Hjelmquist appeared at the back door of the ranchhouse and, walking at a leisurely pace, went out to the barn. Shortly he reappeared, leading the wagon team, harnesed and ready to be hitched to the load of lumber.

After he had hooked the traces to the singletrees, Hjelmquist came alongside the wagon and paused to pack his pipe. If Nita Payne was watching from the house, she would have no way of guessing that Hjelmquist had an accomplice in the wagon, let alone a prisoner.

"Doc?" the Swede whispered, apparently busy with his meerschaum.

"You didn't hurt the girl, did you?" LeBeck whispered back.

The big rancher shook his head.

"No. She wanted to know if Barrett was back from San Antone. Then she asked me if she could have a snack of grub and a chance to rest awhile before she headed back for Cascabel."

Hatfield felt the unbearable tension slowly relax from his nerves. At least Nita was still alive and safe.

"I told her I was building a bridge over Tar Crick," Hjelmquist went on. "You and Hatfield will have to stay out of sight in the wagon until I've driven out of sight of the house."

LeBeck nodded grimly. "I guess we've got enough planking loaded to do the job we want done. Hatfield, get down there behind the end gate."

Hatfield did so, fervently thankful that Nita had no idea he was on this hayrick. Nita was a courageous girl. If she had an idea Hatfield was on the wagon she would pursue on her pony and make some kind of a wild effort to rescue him.

Hjelmquist climbed aboard the hayrick seat up front and got the team in motion. Hatfield, lying on his stomach on the planks he had loaded, kept low to keep from being seen above the end gate of the wagon in case Nita should be watching the wagon's departure from inside the house.

"If she spots LeBeck's satchel—" he thought. But no, she had never seen the pebble-grain leather bag in which LeBeck had carried his pay-roll loot. Anyway, in all probability, LeBeck had secreted the satchel since Hatfield had chanced to spot it on the living room window sill.

LeBeck was flat down on the planks at the front of the wagon, likewise keeping out of sight of the girl. The vehicle was rolling along the main road now, a boiling cloud of dust obscuring the Circle B from view.

Dust from the team and the front wheels was showering into the wagon box. Glancing behind him, Hatfield could hardly see LeBeck, at the front end of the wagon. He saw the glint of dusty sunlight on the barrel of LeBeck's .45, however, and knew the outlaw was keeping him covered.

A SUDDEN thought came to Hatfield. A mile from the house, Hjelmquist would turn the wagon off the Cascabel road, heading into Tar Creek Canyon. The Swede had tricked the sheriff's daughter into thinking he was building a bridge over the creek, which would account for the destination of the wagon.

Hatfield arched his body upward and reached a hand down into a pocket of his bullhide chaps. He knew what that pocket contained—his personal wallet, a book of cigarette papers, a stub of pencil, odds and ends of matches and toothpicks —harmless objects which LeBeck and Hjelmquist had not bothered to remove from their prisoner's pockets.

Now, that miscellany might be the means of saving them from the doom awaiting them at the tar pit.

His body shielding his actions from LeBeck's view, Hatfield took the stub of pencil and wrote a message on the cardboard back of the cigarette-paper book:

> Bob, Stag & the N. Y. men still alive at Tar Pit. Bring guns tonight to Rimrock where we saw mule skeletons. All of us prisoners in hole in Tar Pit. Guard on duty all night so be careful. We can escape if you toss guns to us. Must be tonight or too late. Don't follow Swede's wagon into the canyon under any circumstances.
>
> JIM HATFIELD

By now the wagon was rumbling through the brasada and the silting dust was heavy enough to make Hatfield and LeBeck cough repeatedly as it drifted down into the lumbering haywagon.

That screen of dust enabled Hatfield to reach down into his bootleg and get his Texas Ranger star from its secret compartment in the kangaroo leather lining. He glanced around to see that LeBeck was now standing up on the load of lumber, talking with the Swede in the driver's seat. The wagon was out of sight of Circle B, so LeBeck had no risk of being discovered.

Coming to his hands and knees, Hatfield opened the pin of his Texas Ranger's badge and thrust it through the cardboard on which he had scribbled his message.

Then he dropped it over the tail gate

onto the road.

The brightly furbished silver star should attract Nita Payne's eye as she returned to Cascabel on this road. But if the star buried itself in the dust, Hatfield's bid for rescue was hopelessly lost.

When the wagon load of lumber arrived at the tar pit at canyon's end, Hatfield saw that the scene was in the grip of some unnatural excitement. Latigo Modesto and Voyd Romane were waiting at the edge of the asphalt deposit, and they hailed the return of Hjelmquist and Doc LeBeck with excited shouts. McAllister's corpse had sunk from sight in the hot tar.

"We're in sight of that bullion, men!" Romane yelled, running over to the wagon as LeBeck and Hatfield climbed down. "An hour ago young Hilmar's shovel hit metal. I had the crew dig it out."

"What was it?" LeBeck snapped impatiently. "A silver ingot?"

Romane shook his head.

"The hind wheel of a Conestoga wagon, Doc. The one Major Vanhorne told you about in the Cascabel jail. The wagon's lyin' on its side, but we dug a few feet too far west. We'll have to tunnel in from the bottom of the hole to reach the bar silver."

Hatfield saw LeBeck's pock-pitted face light up with a triumph.

"The wagon's on its side, eh," the outlaw surgeon commented tersely. "That's good. I was afraid Colonel Cushman and Vanhorne might have landed the wagon upside down when they shoved it over the cliff. In that case the bullion would have sunk to bedrock. That might have taken months to recover."

Romane grinned. "As it is, all we got to do is uncover the box and chop our way through. That half a million in Comstock treasure is as good as our'n, Doc."

HATFIELD, at gun's point, was escorted over the plank catwalk to where he could look down into the work pit. Hilmar, Barrett and the members of Professor Bridewell's expedition were shoveling listlessly to fill the windlass tub. Exposed in the bottom of the pit now was the tar-blackened wheel of a prairie schooner and a portion of a Conestoga's box.

Latigo Modesto spoke up with a fiendish anticipation in his voice.

"Another day's work and we can feenish off thees greengos, *no es verdad?*"

LeBeck turned to Hjelmquist. "We'll help Hatfield unload that lumber," he said, "so you can get the wagon back to the Circle B. Modesto, get out to the gate and keep an eye peeled for a rider. The sheriff's daughter is over from Cascabel. She might follow our wagon tracks into the canyon. If she does, we have no recourse other than to take care of her."

The half-breed hurried off with his rifle to his guard post around the curve of Tar Canyon. A sick feeling assailed the pit of Hatfield's stomach as he pondered the chances of Nita Payne's showing up within range of Modesto's .30-30. It was quite likely she might trail the lumber wagon, in her search for clues to the whereabouts of her missing fiancé and old Barrett.

If she spotted the Ranger badge Hatfield had tossed onto the main road . . . but Hatfield refused to think of the outcome if Nita Payne failed to see the silver star lying in the dust. Unless she did, their last hope was smashed!

Back at the wagon, Hatfield and his two captors got busy unloading the planks. In order to expose the sunken Conestoga deep in the asphalt pit, the original excavation would have to be enlarged. That would use up the lumber they had brought out today.

While he worked, Hatfield kept his ear tuned for the crash of a gunshot further down the canyon, which would mean Nita had ridden into Modesto's rifle trap. Infinite relief flowed through him when the wagon was at last unloaded and Sven Hjelmquist headed the hayrick back toward Circle B.

Then a new possibility occurred to Hatfield. What if Nita was still resting

at the Barrett ranchhouse, and the Swedish wagoneer caught sight of the glinting silver star lying on the Circle B road?

As LeBeck headed the Ranger back toward the tar pit, he remarked casually:

"You are an intelligent man, Hatfield. You must be curious as to why I am so interested in shoveling out this tar pit. You must know by now that it is no ordinary wagon I am after."

"I've heard enough," Hatfield said bleakly, "to deduce that a wagon load of bar silver must have been dumped into the tar pit at one time or another, yes."

When they reached the opening in the *brea* deposits, LeBeck spoke again.

"Indirectly I owe this fortune to you, Hatfield. You remember the old Confederate Army officer who shared the Cascabel jail with me?"

Hatfield nodded, scowling.

"Well, that old man told me an amazing story the evening before he was hanged," LeBeck informed. "It was fantastic, but as events have proved, completely true. I think I'll tell you that story, because you will be a party to its conclusion some time tomorrow or the day after. You'll see why it was the luckiest day of my life when you caught up with me at *Los Muertos Soldados* ford on the Rio Nueces."

Standing there in the hot glare of the westering sun, while his fellow prisoners kept up their ceaseless excavation of the exposed wagon wheel and the treasure it had guarded since 1865, Hatfield listened to the story of the Confederate army platoon and its Conestoga load of Nevada silver. He heard about the Comanche attack and the manner in which the sole survivors of the Nueces massacre had rolled the treasure wagon over yonder cliff to sink into this fuming tar pit.

NOW Hatfield knew the explanation for those mule skeletons up on the rimrock road. Indian arrows had probably slaughtered those Confederate mules. The brush probably concealed the bleached bones of Colonel Cushman, too, who had used his engineering instruments and skill to compute the latitude and longitude of this lost spot in the Texas malpais.

"It was from Professor Bridewell that I learned where the molten portion of this asphalt pit would have most likely been back in the early spring of 'Sixty-five," LeBeck ended his narrative. "That's why I didn't attempt to dig out the liquid end of the deposit, or waste time in the hardened asphalt at the opposite end. The weight of a one-ton wagon and heaven knows how much bar silver accounts for the wagon having sunk so far in nineteen years. You can see now, Ranger Hatfield, why I spared your life the other day at the Circle B. I needed your brawn to help the others uncover that wagon!"

CHAPTER XIII

Hopeless Vigil

VOYD ROMANE had hoisted another tub of tar from the pit and LeBeck, reaching out to unlock the handcuff from Hatfield's left wrist, ordered the Ranger to step into the tub. In moments Hatfield had again joined his doomed companions beside the wagon wheel their shovels had uncovered at such a cost of sweat and back-breaking toil.

By sunset, Hatfield and the other LeBeck slaves had succeeded in digging the asphalt away from the rear portion of the Conestoga box. Now, for the first time, Doc LeBeck climbed into the tar tub and had Romane lower him into the pit. LeBeck carried a double-bitted lumberjack's ax, its purpose obvious.

"Turn your backs to the wall, all of you," LeBeck ordered the seven men he had enslaved. "You might get the idea

of smashing my head with a shovel. Don't forget that Romane has a shotgun waiting to butcher the first man who tries to interfere with me in any way."

Hatfield found himself standing, facing the opposite wall of the plank-lined pit, between Bob Hilmar and old Barrett. He heard LeBeck start to work chopping through the tar-encrusted sidewalls of the buried wagon.

Turning to Hilmar, Hatfield whispered that he had seen Nita Payne at Circle B, and told of the faint chance there was of Nita finding his message en route back to Cascabel and, knowing of their situation here, being able to help them during the coming night.

After twenty minutes of chopping, LeBeck had a hole cut into the Conestoga box. Overhead, Voyd Romane was keeping a vigilant eye on their prisoners, a double-barreled buckshot gun across his knees.

He had little to fear from any of the slave laborers. Three of the New York men were on their knees, too exhausted to stand. Professor Bridewell was asleep on his feet, Bob Hilmar helping hold him erect.

An exclamation of excitement came from LeBeck's lips, causing Hatfield to turn around. He saw the outlaw doctor down on his knees straddling the hole he had chopped in the Conestoga. He was tugging a breadloaf-shaped object from the tar which had penetrated the wagon. Even as Hatfield looked, he saw LeBeck pry the object free from its encrusted asphalt and toss it into the empty tub. It landed with a thud indicating its extreme weight for its bulk.

Getting to his feet, the tar-smeared outlaw chipped at the object with his ax blade. The white gleam of pure silver caught the fading glare of the evening sky.

"Comstock Lode bullion, all right!" panted LeBeck. Climbing into the tub he signaled to be hoisted out. "It's too dark to keep working tonight, Voyd. But a couple of days' work should see that half million in our hands!"

When Romane helped LeBeck out of the tub, Hatfield heard the owlhoot medico tell the straw-haired Missourian:

"I'll take this bullion ingot back to the ranch to show the Swede. Just to show my heart's in the right place, give our crew a double ration of bread and water tonight, Voyd. They'll need their strength to hoist the rest of those ingots out tomorrow."

Indigo twilight had filled the box end of Tar Canyon before Romane got around to lowering the gallon jug of water and two loaves of moldy bread down to the seven prisoners.

As had happened yesterday at noon, the famished men fought like animals to get their share of the bread. Jim Hatfield had a better understanding of their ravenous desire for food tonight. To men in their circumstances, instincts were down to the primeval level of the survival of the fittest.

"Well," Voyd Romane called down from the wooden parapet overhead, "I reckon you hombres know this is the last grub you'll get this side of Hades. Soon as we get the bullion above ground *manana,* LeBeck'll bury the lot of you alive under this tar."

SOMEHOW Hatfield curbed the anger that seethed through him at this needlessly inhuman taunting.

"Romane," he shot back, "do you think the good doctor will let you and Modesto —or the Swede either—live to share this bullion with you? Maybe we'll all be buried alive this time tomorrow. I wouldn't expect too much from LeBeck if I were you. "

Romane laughed, but Hatfield knew his shot had struck home.

"Oh, we aim to doublecross Hjelmquist all right," he admitted, "but Latigo and me are compadres of the Doc's."

Romane hoisted the empty tub out of the hole and lashed it in place under the windlass for the night.

"By the way, gents," the rustler called down into the ebon shadows of the pit, "don't any of you try crawlin' out o' this

jackpot tonight. There's a good moon, and both Latigo and me will be standin' guard. We're too close to our bonanza to run any risks of havin' our crew vamoose on us."

After Romane had vanished in the direction of the field tents to cook supper for himself and the half-breed, Hatfield called for a council of war. But Professor Bridewell and his men were already asleep, worn out by the day's digging and exhaustion. Even Barrett's head was bobbing, and it was doubtful if the old Circle B boss had heard Hatfield.

"Bob," Hatfield said to Hilmar, "it's up to you and me to keep awake tonight. Even if Nita got my message, it'll take two of us to handle a getaway from this pit."

Hilmar yawned wearily, blinking in the darkness.

"I'll—be ready—" he sighed, but Hatfield knew that the young cowman was already asleep.

Hilmar, rugged as a young Brahma bull, had about reached the limit of his endurance. It was up to Jim Hatfield to fight off drowsiness alone, until he knew what this last night in the tar pit dungeon would bring.

He saw the Texas sky overhead turn from silver gray to indigo, and finally to black, dusted with myriad stars. He forced himself to keep on his feet, knowing that if he sat down like the others he would drift off to sleep, a sleep from which he would not waken until the outlaws roused them on the morrow.

By now LeBeck and Hjelmquist would be gloating over the bar of Comstock Lode silver which the doctor had extracted from the tar-filled Conestoga. They had probably dissolved the tar from the ingot with kerosene, inside Barrett's ranchhouse.

That left Modesto and Romane on duty here at the tar pit camp, to make sure that their emaciated prisoners attempted no last-resort escape. Everything for those prisoners now depended on whether or not Nita Payne had spotted a Texas Ranger's star lying in the dust of the Cascabel road this afternoon!

A lopsided moon cruised into view over the tar pit, silhouetting the *brasada* which furred the canyon rim, fifty feet overhead. Hatfield took a position alongside the exposed wagon wheel, keeping his eye on the sector of rimrock where he and Nita had discovered the skeletons of the mules which a band of Confederate soldiers had used to haul the silver cache out from the frontier in the closing days of the Civil War.

The other prisoners were snoring feebly down in this gravelike pit. Overhead a foraging bat winged briefly against the moon. Hatfield's ears caught the far-off wail of a coyote baying at the moon.

That moon edged with infinite slowness across the patch of sky visible to Hatfield in the bottom of the tar pit. He made no attempt at climbing out of the excavation, knowing that Modesto or Romane were posted somewhere close by, standing guard over this pit of doomed souls.

BY THE last moon ray that penetrated the wooden-lined hole, Hatfield consulted his watch. It was one-thirty. Nita Payne had had more than enough time to skirt the canyon rim and reach the mule bones by now. The truth was plain. The girl had not seen the silver star on the Cascabel road with its vital message!

And then, timed with the despairing thought through his head, Jim Hatfield's eyes caught a tiny blur of movement up on the canyon brink directly overhead. Only the slightest agitation of the tornillo weeds growing at the rimrock's edge. A foraging armadillo or even a field mouse could have shaken that brush.

A tiny object dropped out of the sky to land in the tar pit at Hatfield's feet. He stooped to snatch it up. It was a diamond ring—an engagement ring. The ring Bob Hilmar had slipped on Nita Payne's finger.

Hatfield's pulses raced. Nita was up *there on the rim!* She had *risked* dropping the ring into the tar pit, signaling her presence there to anyone waiting in the hole into whose depths she could not see.

Squatting down, Hatfield took a match

from the band of his Stetson and struck it on the iron tire of the Conestoga wheel, letting it flare brightly for an instant, then blowing it out. The brief glare of light would not be visible to Modesto or Romane, standing guard somewhere outside. But it would let Nita know her message had been received.

An agonizing wait followed. There was no movement in the brush up on the rim. Had it not been for the diamond ring gripped in his fingers, Hatfield might have thought this whole thing was a figment of a deranged imagination.

Then a larger object came hurtling down through space arching briefly across the stars. Hatfield leaped to catch it, the weight of it numbing his fingers.

Nita Payne had shown rare caution. This was a pair of loaded Colt .45s, tightly wrapped in a strip of wool the girl had torn from a saddle blanket. Included with the two sixguns was a quantity of ammunition tightly wrapped in a bandanna neckerchief. The guns Hatfield recognized as Sheriff Payne's.

As he tested the cylinder mechanisms of the two weapons, his blood racing hotly through his entire body, Hatfield saw that a rolled sheet of paper was protruding from the muzzle of one of the guns. With trembling hands he drew out the cylinder of paper and then, covering his hands with his Stetson crown, he struck another match.

The paper contained a message from the sheriff's daughter who crouched in hiding up on the rim:

Jim, Bob, Uncle Stag:

Thank God I saw Jim's Ranger badge lying in the road on my way home. The thought had come to me to trail the Swede's wagon and force him to tell me the truth at gun's point. I'm thankful that Dad made me bring his guns with me. I only wish I had a rifle with me up here on the rim.

There is a light in one of the tents. There is one man inside the tent—I can see his shadow. There is another guard sitting smoking a cigarette about ten yards due north of the excavation. I can see him plainly in the moonlight. I must wait until I am sure he is looking the other way before I drop this bundle down to you. I pray to God that I don't miss the opening, and that these guns won't strike anyone down there.

The Swede is bacj at Uncle Stag's. I hid in the brush when I saw him coming back with the wagon, shortly after I discovered Jim's badge lying in the road.

Vaya con Dios,
NITA

Jim Hatfield's lips moved in a prayer of thanksgiving to the girl who was waiting up on the rimrock for this drama of gunplay showdown to unfold in the canyon below her. She had tipped off the Ranger where to expect trouble from the guard.

POCKETING half of the supply of extra cartridges, Hatfield crawled across the sleeping men and nudged Bob Hilmar's shoulder. He put a hand over the young rancher's mouth as the waddy came awake, struggling like a man in the grip of a nightmare.

"Nita got a pair of guns to us, Bob," Hatfield whispered, his lips close to Hilmar's ear. "She's a thoroughbred, that girl. And she sent you a token of her love—"

Hilmar was fully awake as the Ranger pressed Nita's ring into his hand. Hatfield heard a sob start deep in the cowboy's throat. Hilmar remained silent while Hatfield explained Nita's message.

"Brace your feet on the spokes of the wagon wheel," Hatfield ordered his young friend, "and I'll climb up on your shoulders. I've got to expect that guard to start shooting the minute he spots my head over the rim of this hole. The steadier you brace my legs the better chance I'll have of dropping that guard with my first shot. Then we'll have the other one in the tent to gun down before we can hoist the others out of here. Ready?"

"Ready," Hilmar whispered, his voice taut with excitement.

It taxed Bob Hilmar's depleted strength to the utmost to support Jim Hatfield's solid weight on his shoulders. Six-gun gripped in his right hand, the Ranger seized the wooden curbing at the top of the excavation with his left, to steady himself and ease in some degree the burden he was placing on Hilmar. Not until then did he slowly raise his bare head over the rim of the pit.

The moonlight pouring into the canyon revealed the crouched shape of Latigo Modesto, identifiable by his cone-peaked sombrero and bannering serape, seated on a pile of lumber thirty feet away.

Hatfield braced his right forearm on the curbing, notching his gunsights on the half-breed. He saw moon rays refracted from the shiny barrel of Modesto's rifle as the *mestizo* took a last drag from his black *cigarillo* and tossed the stub aside.

"Manos altos, Modesto! Get your hands up!"

Hatfield's command was pitched in a low voice calculated to reach Modesto without carrying to the lamplighted tent where the guard's partner, Romane, was located.

Latigo Modesto jumped to his feet, levering a cartridge into the breech of his Winchester carbine. The ghostly voice he had heard had come from nowhere, seemingly. Peering around wildly, he caught sight of Jim Hatfield as the Ranger, aided by a mighty boost from Bob Hilmar, vaulted out of the tar pit and poised on the wooden curbing on one knee, like an athlete at the starting line of a race.

"Caramba!" Modesto yelled as he caught sight of the six-shooter clutched in the Ranger's fist.

It was the knowledge that one of his prisoners had somehow armed himself, as much as Hatfield's presence on the edge of the tar pit, that made Modesto invite suicide.

Whipping the walnut stock of his carbine up to his shoulder, he triggered the .30-30 to send a copper-jacketed slug whining past Hatfield's ear. It imbedded itself in the asphalt at the base of the cliff.

CHAPTER XIV

Moonlight Gunplay

MODESTO did not get an opportunity to correct his hasty aim. Purple-orange flame licked from the bore of Hatfield's six-gun, and the .45 slug smashed the half-breed outlaw in the forehead, mushrooming through the skull to rip off the back of his head.

As Hatfield came to his feet he saw Modesto topple lifelessly, his blood splashing over the lumber behind him. From the rimrock at his back, Nita Payne screamed a warning, and at the same instant Voyd Romane leaped from the fly of the lamplighted tent, yelling in alarm as he came out to investigate the thunder of gunfire.

Running along the plank catwalk, Hatfield drove two shots toward Romane, saw both slugs miss, merely plucking slots in the canvas roof of the tent behind Romane.

Bawling in terror, Voyd Romane ducked out of sight behind the tent. Hatfield, knowing that limned in this moonlight, he made a sure target for the blond giant's guns, flung himself down behind the lumber near Modesto's corpse.

"Jim—Jim!" Nita cried shrilly from the rimrock. "The other man's getting a horse! He'll ride to the ranch and warn the Swede!"

Hatfield came to his feet. Out in the rope corral beyond the tents, too far to make for accurate shooting with a six-gun in the tricky moonlight, Voyd Romane was scrambling aboard an unsaddled horse and was spurring frantically toward the canyon road.

Bob Hilmar and the other prisoners trapped down in the tar pit were shouting excitedly now. Hatfield leaped over Modesto's sprawled corpse and snatched up the *mestizo's* rifle, lifting it to his cheek and triggering a fast shot at the speeding Romane.

But the rigors of the past two days had robbed Hatfield of his usually rock-steady shooting. A groan escaped him as he saw Romane vanish out of sight around the bend of the canyon, heading for Circle B to warn Doc LeBeck and Hjelmquist of the disaster at the tar pit.

A fast drumbeat of hoofs fading into the distance down-canyon told Hatfield that Romane had not even reined up with any

idea of firing at the Ranger from ambush.

Carrying Modesto's rifle, Jim Hatfield raced between the field tents, on to the stock corral. A whistle brought his magnificent stallion, Goldy, running toward him. From a pile of bridles and saddles near the corral Hatfield snatched up a headstall at random and, as the sorrel came up to nuzzle his shoulder, Hatfield slipped the split-ear halter over Goldy's head and vaulted astride the stallion. There was no time to waste saddling up.

Twenty yards from the corral, Hatfield reined up to turn in the direction of the tar pit.

"Nita!" he shouted toward the skylined figure of the girl on the rimrock.

"Yes, Jim?" came the girl's agitated voice.

"Have you got a lariat with you?"

"Yes!"

Hatfield paused a moment to get the prancing stallion under control. Well rested since his arrival here, Goldy was anxious to work off some steam. He would get the chance, but Hatfield had important information to give Nita Payne before he began his pursuit of Voyd Romane.

"Nita, get Bob and Stag and the others out of there as quickly as possible! Tie your 'lass-rope to a stout tree up there and climb down the rope. You can use the windlass cable to get Bob and the others up. And you'll find a pair of six-guns on that dead 'breed, maybe other guns in the tents. Got that?"

"Yes, Jim!" the girl shouted back breathlessly.

HATFIELD touched Goldy with tar-clogged spurs, and a moment later he was out of view of the tar pit, heading down the canyon. The moonlight revealed that Romane, in his flight, had paused to swing shut the big log gate, seeking to delay pursuit. In the same glimpse, Hatfield saw that Romane had padlocked the big chain to lock the gate.

"Jump, Goldy!"

The magnificent sorrel bunched himself for a flying leap that would have done credit to a thoroughbred steeplechase racer, steel-shod hoofs clearing the four-foot barrier with room to spare. Without breaking stride, Goldy leveled out to a dead run, golden mane and tale bannering in the wind. Hatfield crouched low over the sorrel's withers, Indian fashion.

The canyon road was obscure behind settling clouds of dust marking Romane's passage between the barranca walls, the acrid smell of the alkali cutting Hatfield's nostrils.

The wind tore at the Ranger's black hair, squeezed his eyes to slits. He was well aware that Romane might have holed up anywhere along this trail, waiting for Hatfield to run into range of his six-guns. Even the trail of dust marking the flight of Romane's horse could be deceptive, for the blond Rio Grander might have jumped off and taken refuge in the brush, sending the horse on to confuse the pursuing Ranger.

Every boulder nest, every clump of spiny cactus and smoketree scrub along the trail might be concealing Death. It was a risk Hatfield had to run. Romane was a pawn in this grim game, a pawn acting under Doc LeBeck's orders. If Romane succeeded in reaching the Circle B, it would give LeBeck a chance to take refuge in the brasada, or, worse yet, bring the outlaw medico and his Swedish henchman out to the tar pit to do battle with Nita Payne and the recent slaves who were in no physical condition to resist.

Sweeping out of Tar Canyon onto the Cascabel road, Hatfield saw where Romane's horse had turned north, toward Barrett's ranch. Romane, then, was not brave enough to match shots with a Texas Ranger. His one thought was to reach his gun boss and let LeBeck take over.

Hatfield put Goldy along the Circle B road, the sorrel as yet showing no signs of faltering in its heartbreaking gait. Flinging back the miles, the horse that Hatfield fondly believed was without a match for speed and bottom anywhere in the Lone Star State was rapidly cutting down Romane's head start, as evidenced by the ever-thickening density of the dust clouds

stirred up by the pounding hoofs of Romane's steed.

Then, rounding the curve of the road onto the straightaway which ended at Stag Barrett's home ranch, Hatfield realized that Romane had beaten him to Circle B. Lights gleamed in the ranchhouse. The trail of dust led straight to the gate. Romane's head start had paid off.

Hatfield reined Goldy off the road, the sorrel plunging into the black brasada thickets and coming to a halt. The Ranger slid off the stallion's lathered back and headed toward the ranch grounds at a run, threading his way along a game trace which formed a tunnel through the flowering agarita and thorny junco growth.

Reaching the edge of the clearing which Barrett and Hilmar had hewn from the Texas jungle as the site of their corrals and outbuildings, Hatfield dropped to one knee, checking the loads in the magazine of the rifle he carried—Modesto's. He was thankful now that he had brought the long-range piece along to augment the Colt .45 of the sheriff's which Nita had tossed into the tar pit.

Above the solid slugging of his heartbeats, Jim Hatfield could hear men shouting inside the ranchhouse. Then, clear as day in the westering moonshine, Hatfield saw the big shapes of Doc LeBeck and Sven Hjelmquist come slogging down the front porch steps, followed by the limping Voyd Romane.

THEY were heading for the horse barn to get mounts. Their destination might be Mexico, but Hatfield doubted that. With half a million dollars' worth of unrecovered silver bullion waiting for him at the *brea* pit, it was not likely that an outlaw of LeBeck's ruthless caliber would skip the country and leave his loot.

When the three outlaws vanished inside the barn, Hatfield leaped to his feet and, knowing he was a plain target in the spectral moonlight should he be seen, sprinted as fast as his spike-heeled cowboots would permit until he reached the sheetiron water tanks at the foot of Stag Barrett's windmill.

Crouching behind that bullet-proof barricade of water-filled tanks, Hatfield waited for the three owlhooters to show. The odds were three to one, and the Ranger did not underestimate the ferocity of these men. They were not only fighting to keep their ill-gotten bullion, but their lives depended on the showdown that lay ahead.

A moment later Hatfield caught sight of the three outlaws spurring from the black archway of the adobe barn. He could hear Romane babbling almost incoherently:

"It won't do to take the road back, Doc. That blasted Ranger is on the prowl and he's got that hoss of his that we all tried to ride and couldn't."

Fifty feet away from the barn, LeBeck reined up, the others following suit. The cause for this stop, Hatfield sensed, was Voyd Romane's action in spurring away in the direction of the brasada, looming black and sinister beyond the Circle B house.

"Where you going, Romane?" bellowed LeBeck, his snow-white hair gleaming in the moonlight.

Romane twisted defiantly around in his saddle to glare at the medico. LeBeck had drawn a revolver but Romane defied it.

"You can have the bullion, Doc!" he yelled. "I want no part of this. I'm headin' for the Rio—"

A bullet smashing him in the chest broke off that defiant outburst. As the rustler slid inertly from stirrups to thud soddenly on the hard-packed gumbo, Doc LeBeck holstered his smoking gun and picked up his reins. Turning to the Swedish rancher at his elbow, LeBeck said callously:

"Always knew Romane had a yellow streak a yard wide down his back. Well, Sven, where do you stand? Do I face Hatfield alone, or do you want a share of that bullion?"

Hatfield saw the big Scandinavian grin, though it was a little sick.

"I am vith you to the finish, by Yiminy. Let's ride."

Resting his rifle across the near edge of a water trough, Hatfield squeezed trigger. His slug tore the Stetson from LeBeck's leonine head.

Both men reined up instantly, staring around wildly to locate the source of the unexpected bullet. A spiral of gunsmoke lifting above the water tanks fifty yards away drew their eyes to Hatfield's location, simultaneously with the hidden Ranger's clear-voiced command reaching them across the night:

"I've got you both covered. Take your choice of a chance at a fair trial—or shooting it out here and now!"

LeBeck was the first to recover himself. Wheeling his horse, he called hoarsely:

"You hold the aces, Ranger. I didn't gamble on you showing up so soon after Romane got his!"

Hjelmquist flung himself from saddle, his horse shielding him from Hatfield's line of fire. The Ranger bit his lip, not expecting this maneuver from the Swede. He heard the solid strike of Hjelmquist's boots as the big rancher sprinted toward the shelter of the barn, yelling:

"He'll murder us both, Doc! That Hatfield is a killer!"

The Swede's pony bolted, giving Hatfield a view of Hjelmquist's broad back. For an instant the Ranger's gunsights were lined on X where the Swede's galluses crossed, but it went against the grain, violated the code Hatfield lived by, to kill a man from behind. His finger relaxed on the trigger.

HE SAW Hjelmquist make his running dive into the adobe-walled barn, and then turned his attention back to LeBeck.

"I'm stepping down, Hatfield," the cotton-headed outlaw doctor called distinctly through the moonlight. "Hold your fire. I won't buck you."

Hatfield frowned, knowing LeBeck's treachery. Finally he called warily:

"Dismount on this side of your horse, Doc. I don't want to drop you if I can take you alive, but with the Swede on my flank I'll take no chances!"

From a narrow window of the barn suddenly came jetting gun flashes. Hatfield felt the water tank tremble against his shoulder as Hjelmquist's .45 slugs smashed into the metal walls of the trough. Hatfield did not let the Swede's sniping take his attention off LeBeck however. LeBeck was the dangerous member of this combination. He was the man to watch unceasingly.

Stepping down from saddle, LeBeck slapped his horse on the rump. When it trotted away, the outlaw doctor raised his arms and turned to face the windmill.

Hjelmquist had reloaded his Colt and resumed shooting, this time from a window several yards to the left of the former location. Hatfield realized that the Swede was trying to keep the Ranger pinned under cover, to give LeBeck a chance to make a run for it.

"Stand where you are, LeBeck!" Hatfield shouted. On hands and knees to keep from showing himself above the water tanks, he wriggled his way along the windmill tower legs. Behind the stone decking foundation of the pumphouse he found a vantage point.

CHAPTER XV

End, and Beginning

LEBECK remained rooted to his tracks, out in the open, his arms aloft. The curved prongs of six-gun handles protruded from LeBeck's midriff though he made no move toward them. The man would, of course, have to be quickly disarmed, but the first thing was to dispose of Hjelmquist.

Shoving his rifle ahead of him, Hatfield worked his way around the pumphouse, peering around the corner toward the barn. If the Swede was wise, he would quit the barn and take to the brasada. That way, he could get around behind Hatfield, and the Ranger would find himself between two fires.

A shaft of moonlight spilled through a hole in the barn roof. Hatfield saw the Swede's stalking figure cut across that moonlight where it was visible through the yawning archway of the barn, a momentarily visible target.

Instantly Hatfield squeezed trigger to send a .30-30 bullet screaming into the barn, aiming by pure instinct.

A long, high-pitched scream of mortal agony came from Sven Hjelmquist, then the big rancher came staggering out of the barn into the open moonlight, palms pressed to his side.

Ten steps into the open, and Hjelmquist pitched headlong on the ground and lay there writhing in pain.

"Doc—Doc!" the Swede moaned piteously. "Help me! I got a bullet, *ja*. Save me, Doc!"

Hatfield came to his feet. Hjelmquist was not bluffing. If he had been faking he wouldn't have come reeling out into the open, inviting another bullet.

Leaving the windmill, the Ranger headed toward Doc LeBeck, who had not shifted an inch, having no idea where Hatfield was, and taking no chances on a Ranger bullet himself.

"It would seem my Scandihoovian accomplice is in need of a surgeon's help, Hatfield," LeBeck drawled, as Hatfield approached. "My satchel is in the house. With your permission—"

Hatfield swiftly stripped the guns from LeBeck's holsters and frisked the white-haired man for derringers or other concealed weapons.

"Go on over and have a look at Hjelmquist," he ordered then, letting out a long pent-up breath. "If your professional skill can help him, I won't stand in your way. I'd grant a rattlesnake that much mercy."

Hjelmquist rolled over on his back, watching the Ranger and the doctor approach. The front of the Swede's shirt was soggy with clogged blood and dust. Hatfield's lucky shot had caught him below the short ribs on the right side, had probably pierced his liver. He was dying, Hatfield thought.

"Wait a minute," Hatfield bit out, as he saw LeBeck stoop alongside Hjelmquist. "I want the Swede's gun."

LeBeck's right hand shot with blurring speed toward the holster at Hjelmquist's side. His hand coiled around the blood-stained Colt butt and he had the revolver half out of leather when Hatfield lashed out with his right foot, kicking LeBeck in the hand with such force that the gun flew a dozen feet, striking the adobe wall of the barn.

"You can't blame a man for trying, Hatfield," LeBeck said, rubbing his sore hand. "I've spent my luck, I guess. I would have wagered I'd caught you napping."

Hatfield edged around to face LeBeck across the Swede's prostrate, writhing form. The man was groaning piteously.

"Look him over, Doc," the Ranger said. "Do what you can to save his life. I'd say, though, he's frayed out his string."

LEBECK ripped open the Swede's shirt and examined the flesh around the blood-oozing bullet wound in the man's side. He got to his feet, eyeing Hatfield bleakly. Hjelmquist had gone suddenly limp, but he was still breathing.

"He's lapsed into a coma," LeBeck said. "The best I can do is probe for the bullet and do what I can to stop the bleeding. But I'll need my surgical instruments. As I told you, my kit is in the house."

Hatfield nodded. "Let's go get it. I always prefer to bring a man to justice alive rather than cold meat for a coroner. Otherwise I'd have dropped the two of you. I had plenty of chance."

LeBeck shrugged and led the way across the yard past Voyd Romane's sprawled corpse. The Missourian's pony skin vest was smeared with blood.

"Wouldn't have shot him if I'd known you were in the offing," LeBeck commented. "You are a formidable foe, Hatfield. In due time I hope to learn how you escaped the tar pit. It borders on the miraculous—quite in keeping with your reputation."

Hatfield kept close behind LeBeck, alert for treachery, as they climbed the porch

steps and entered the lamplighted living room. An upset chair mutely told of the consternation that Romane's arrival with bad news had caused here.

Conspicuous on the table alongside the lighted oil lamp was a shimmering ingot of pure silver, the only part of the tar pit loot that LeBeck would ever see. The asphalt had been cleaned from the bullion bar with alcohol, and stamped on the furbished silver bar was the word "OPHIR," the name of the mine from whence the precious metal had come in far-off Nevada.

Alongside the bar of brasada bullion was the familiar black pebble-grained bag stamped with LeBeck's initials. His back to Hatfield, LeBeck picked up the satchel and unsnapped its fasteners.

The Ranger moved in fast, knowing the doctor might have a gun concealed there. But LeBeck had merely taken a small vial of white chemical from the kit.

"A sedative for my patient—the last patient of my long and not undistinguished career as a practitioner specializing in gunshot wounds," LeBeck announced and grinned, shutting the satchel and lifting it by its black handle. "We must hurry, Hatfield. It will take all my skill to save Hjelmquist for the legal noose."

Returning to where the Swedish rancher lay on the ground in front of the barn, LeBeck opened the satchel and placed a scrap of gauze on the ground beside Hjelmquist. On it he laid a glittering scalpel and a porcelain-tipped probe.

Then, taking a stethescope from the bag, LeBeck placed the tubes in his ears and began exploring the Swede's naked chest with the bell of the instrument. After a moment he removed the tubes from his ears and tossed the instrument back in his kitbag.

"Our Scandinavian friend is beyond our help, Hatfield," he said quietly. "You have another victim to boast about when you return to your Austin headquarters, eh?"

Hatfield's mouth compressed. "No," he murmured, staring down at the S Bar H owner's death-slackened face. "I never boast of taking a human life. Quite the contrary. As a lawman, I—"

He saw LeBeck drop something to the ground, a shiny object that tinkled when it hit the rubble. It was the glass vial LeBeck had taken from his satchel at the ranchhouse.

A prescience that LeBeck had outwitted him shot through the Ranger as he snatched up the vial. It was empty of the white powder that had filled it. But the label told him the poisonous nature of the drug it had contained—"Strychnine Sulphate."

Hatfield looked up just as spasm crossed LeBeck's smallpox-scarred face. Little drools of foam leaked from his mouth.

"An alkaloid compounded from nux vomica seeds," LeBeck explained pedantically. "Very useful to the medical profession as a stimulant, but extremely toxic to humans in excess of a two-grain dose. I swallowed over a hundred grains."

THE vial slipped from Hatfield's fingers. He saw LeBeck sway slightly, his throat muscles contorting.

"You lose, Hatfield," LeBeck whispered gloatingly. "I have placed myself quite beyond the reach of your hangman. I hope—the bullion—brings you better luck—than it—brought—brought—"

Like a hewn tree, Doc LeBeck crashed full length to the ground. A paroxysm swept his body, and then he was still.

Hatfield turned away from the gruesome sight. Placing his forefingers between his teeth he gave the whistle signal that brought Goldy trotting out of the brasada to his side. . . .

This night marked an end of an episode in the Ranger's stormy destiny, but for Nita and the others it was a glorious beginning. A radiant dawn was spilling its crimson flood across the endless expanse of bleak Texas brasada when Jim Hatfield rode back to the box end of the canyon. Bob Hilmar and Nita Payne, seeing him, ran out to meet him.

Over by the tents, Stag Barrett and the New York archeologists were eating ravenously from a grub box belonging to the outlaws, the first real food they had tasted

in twenty days. A lariat hanging over the cliff rim showed how Nita had come down into the canyon. Hilmar had used it to climb out, and the windlass made short work of hauling the trapped prisoners out of the pit. They had fully expected to be buried alive there.

As Hatfield swung wearily off Goldy's back he anticipated the question rising to Hilmar's lips.

"All's *bueno*," he said heavily. "LeBeck poisoned himself. He shot Romane. And I tallied the Swede with a lucky shot. Our ordeal is over."

Nita reached up to take Hatfield's gaunt, whip-scarred cheeks between her palms and, while her husband-to-be looked on smilingly, she crushed her warm lips to the Ranger's.

"Thanks," the lawman laughed. "You're lucky, both of you. When is this wedding coming off?"

"As soon as we can get back to Cascabel and line up a minister," Nita answered breathlessly. "We'll be married in Dad's bedroom, so he can give his daughter in marriage and all, you know. You'll be there for the ceremony, won't you, Jim? Say you will!"

Hatfield grinned. "Captain McDowell's got an urgent case lined up for me down on the Gulf," he said, "but I'll need a few days' rest. I feel hungry enough to eat one of the Professor's saber toothed tigers, right now."

Grizzled old Stagg Barrett came limping over to join them. When he had heard the details of Hatfield's showdown at the Circle B, he waggled his head dourly.

"LeBeck was a strange, a diabolical man," he said thoughtfully. "Brilliant, but morally as bad as the worst ignorant outlaw unhung. The only unscrupulous doctor *I* ever met. A disgrace to an honorable profession. A pity he cheated justice, dying by his own hand."

"We owe you a tremendous debt, Jim," Hilmar broke in. "But luckily, we are all in a position to pay you back with something better than mere thanks. That bullion cache is as much yours as it is ours. Far more so—"

HATFIELD shook his head. "The silver," he said. "was found on the Circle B, so title to it rests in the owner of Circle B . . . Of course, Stag, if you want to share it with the Professor, to make up for his ordeal, I imagine science can use money in the pursuit of knowledge."

Professor Bridewell came up in time to overhear the Ranger's last joking remark.

"That bullion can rest in that tar pit for all time to come, so far as we are concerned," the scientist declared, laughing. "We have lost our zest for exploring *brea* deposits. Anyway, to us the fossil remains we have already dug up are far more precious than all of LeBeck's treasure."

Jim Hatfield stared off at the smoking asphaltum, and shuddered at the recollection of the grim adventure it had brought him and these people about him.

"You'll all feel better after a good long sleep and some of Nita's cooking," he said. "Although, personally, I'll never smell the odor of tar again without getting the creeps."

Jim Hatfield Sees Through the Vicious Masquerade of a Daring Outlaw Chief

IN

THE PECOS BARRICADE

Another Exciting Texas Ranger Novel

By JACKSON COLE

•

COMING NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER YARNS!

With Marshal Fry at his heels, outlaw Littlejohn takes time out to jam the plans of a killer crew!

LONG SAM Comes Through

By LEE BOND

KEEPING anxious eyes on his backtrail was not a new experience for Long Sam Littlejohn. He was doing it now, easing the tough old roan gelding he called Sleeper through brushy country at a steady pace. Rain hammered down from the leaden Texas sky, rattling on the slicker that covered Long Sam's gaunt, unusually tall frame from throat to shins. The slicker, as black as Long Sam's boots, cot-

ton pants, sateen shirt and dripping hat, looked like polished metal when lightning flashed in the dismal gloom.

"Maybe we lost that bushwhackin' hellion, Sleeper!" Long Sam muttered, smoky eyes straining to see back through the rain.

Outlawed, with a sizeable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam often had an enterprising lawman or some bounty-hungry citizen riding his sign. Generally it was stocky Joe Fry, a derby-wearing, cigar-chewing, deputy United States marshal working out of Austin, who gave Long Sam the most trouble. Fry hated the gaunt outlaw bitterly, hounding and hunting him almost constantly. But the Nemesis on Long Sam's trail this time was a lanky Indian buck, not bull-headed Joe Fry.

Long Sam had forded the Red River and ridden onto Texas soil just before dawn that morning. By the time the sun was well up, he had discovered that the lanky, mean-looking Indian was cold-trailing him. The Indian was mounted on a fine bay gelding, bareback, and was lugging a new Henry repeating rifle.

Twice during the day Long Sam had tried to waylay and surprise his pursuer, only to have the Indian open up on him from concealment with the rifle. A shallow gash along his left ribs that ached dully reminded the gaunt outlaw that the Indian was a dangerous customer!

"But now that this rain has set in, maybe we can ditch that warwhoop, and get on across the hills yonder to old Dan Burrell's Slash B, Sleeper," the outlaw muttered. "Something tells me that cussed Injun knows I've got this wad of beef money for old Dan, though Indians generally don't bother holdin' a man up for money."

LONG SAM recalled the time, now many weeks past, when he had come this way with over a thousand head of old Dan Burrell's longhorns. He had piloted that herd across the Indian Territory and onto the Kansas market without serious hitches. He was grinning faintly, wondering what had become of the wild, rough cowhands he haid paid off in Abilene, when Sleeper snorted and almost jumped out from under him.

"What in blazes!" the outlaw grunted.

He grabbed the biscuit and saved himself a fall when both feet flew out of the stirrups. Then something bit savagely at his arms and chest and he felt himself peeled backwards from the saddle.

"Noosed, by thunder!" he groaned as the wet earth seemed to leap up and strike hard along his back.

Long Sam rolled over and tried to throw off the slack rope. But a horse came pounding at him and he saw a black shape hurtle down from the horse's back. A man landed astride him with trip-hammer force, slamming him down into the mud. Then the hard snout of a gun pressed his cheek!

"Relax, Sammy!" a gritty voice advised.

"Joe Fry!" Long Sam gulped.

"Right the first guess!" the deputy chortled. "Having that Injun keep you bothered until I could pick the time and place to nab you sure worked fine!"

"So you set that Indian after me, did you?" Long Sam asked thickly.

"I did!" Fry snorted. "Now get some sleep, noose-bait!"

The tone of Fry's voice as well as the words he spoke warned Long Sam what to expect. The gaunt outlaw tried to dodge, but was too slow. The six-shooter that had been gouging his face caught him along the side of the head, giving him the impression that he was watching foxfire burst and scatter over a swamp. When the outlaw's wits began clearing, he figured that he had been addled for a moment or two, and meant to lay into Joe Fry for fair. He opened his eyes and got a shock.

That wallop on the head had done more than just addle him for a moment or two. He was lying on dry ground under a sandstone overhang. A sizable fire burned cheerily nearby. Beside the fire squatted Joe Fry and the lanky Indian who had trailed Long Sam all day. Fry and the

Indian were arguing heatedly, both angry. Long Sam tried to sit up, swearing softly when he discovered that he was tightly bound with a wet saddle rope.

"I don't deny that I promised you money if you followed that Littlejohn hellion today!" Fry squalled in the Indian's face. "Alright, here's a gold piece, worth ten dollars. Take it!"

"White man I follow all day carries much money!" the Indian declared. "Me want that."

"The money Littlejohn aimed to steal from Dan Burrell's niece is still on his saddle!" Fry retorted. "We can't catch his cayuse until daylight. But you don't get—hey, I'll blast you down, Injun!"

The bent-nosed, mean-looking Indian had suddenly whipped a wicked scalping knife from a sheath at his flank. Fry cagily toppled to his back, and drove a pair of shiny button shoes into the Indian's bare middle when the buck plunged down at him. The Indian sailed backwards, lit on one brawny shoulder, then balled up in a knot, grunting. Fry chuckled, jumped to his feet, and slid a pistol from a holster beneath the tails of his rain-soaked brown coat. He started towards the unmoving Indian, still chuckling.

"Keep away from that buck, you fool!" Long Sam yelled.

"Why?" Fry countered, glancing around at the bound outlaw.

"He's playing possum!" Long Sam gritted. "Get in reach of him and he'll lay you open with that knife."

"That would make you feel real bad, wouldn't it?" Fry jeered.

"Maybe I'm thinkin' of my own skin!" Long Sam retorted. "Hogtied the way I am, that Indian would sure cut my throat if he got you out of the way."

Fry snorted, and went towards the Indian, chill gray eyes wary. He prodded the buck sharply with a shoe toe, then turned to grin cockily at Long Sam.

"You knew the cuss was out cold, and wanted me to dally around until he got his wits back!" the deputy sneered. "Sammy, you and your schemes—"

"Look out!" Long Sam bawled.

FRY whirled, reaching for the hammer of his pistol with a stubby thumb. The big Indian was up, a triumphant yowl ringing from his lean throat as he swiped at Fry with the wicked knife. Long Sam saw the blade rip Fry's coat, and heard the deputy's yell of surprise. The Indian slashed at the officer again just as Fry pedaled back, trying to point his pistol. The Indian's knife hit Fry's gun hand, and Long Sam groaned in dismay when he saw the deputy's pistol spill from a hand that streamed blood.

"Kick him!" Long Sam bellowed. "Joe, kick that Indian in the belly!"

Frey fell back, dodging another wild swipe of the now reddened blade. The deputy's face was chalk white, and the spurting hand semed to have him worried. But he was as gritty as they came, and kept his wits about him.

"Keep away from that devil, Joe!" Long Sam advised.

Long Sam had barely shouted the warning when the Indian's moccasins skidded on loose stones. Joe Fry slammed at him instantly, blocky shoulders pounding the Indian's midriff. The deputy got his left hand locked around the sinewy wrist behind the hand that held the knife, bloody right fist ripping into the Indian's face. They tripped and went down in a crashing fall, the Indian spinning over to land on top.

"Gouge his eyes, Joe!" the outlaw yelled.

Long Sam's voice choked off in astonishment. In his anxiety he had kept lunging and threshing around, only vaguely aware that the ropes on his wrists were burning away skin. But suddenly Long Sam felt his hands slipping in the turns of saddle rope Joe Fry had used to tie him!

The outlaw heaved mightily, knowing instantly the reason why he was getting loose. The saddle rope had been rain soaked when Fry used it to make those ties. And a wet saddle rope would give under enough pressure, since wetting caused the hemp to contract temporarily. Long Sam heaved again and felt his right

hand, minus considerable skin, skid free!

But the gaunt outlaw's sense of elation was quickly blighted. The raging Indian had wrenched his knife hand free of Joe Fry's grip, whipping the blade high for a down-thrust. Long Sam ripped his left hand out of the rope and sprang up, howling at the top of his lungs. His ankles were still securely bound and he could only hop clumsily toward the Indian and Joe Fry.

"Grab his elbow with both hands, Joe!" Long Sam bellowed.

Fry seized the Indian's arm, only to have the buck do a flip that sent them both tumbling over and over. Long Sam hobbled up just in time to see them land in the fire, sending up a shower of sparks and smoke. When the live coals got to the buck's naked hide he let out a whoop that drew a grin from Long Sam. Fry suddenly released his hold on the bawling Indian and scrambled out of the fire, his wet clothing steaming in several places.

Long Sam dug a keen-bladed clasp knife from his trouser pocket. He opened it, bent over, and ripped the wet rope from about his ankles. He straightened up just as the snarling Indian leaped at him, knife slashing. Long Sam felt the blade burn the top of his left shoulder as he lunged in and under the thrust. He drove his own smaller knife up in a quick strike. The Indian reeled away, the scalping knife spilling from nerveless fingers as blood sprayed from a deep wound in his shoulder. Long Sam stooped, snatched something off the ground, and whirled as Joe Fry charged towards him.

"That's my gun!" Fry howled. "Hand it over, you crane-legged whelp!"

"The Rangers and most Texas sheriffs let me alone, Joe, because I never did anything worse than fight the carpetbaggers and the scum the carpetbaggers put in as state police after the war was over!" Long Sam snapped. "If you'd quit hollerin' my name every time a crime is committed anywhere in Texas, I'd soon be able to get a pardon."

Fry's replies were sulphuric and loud. Long Sam glanced away, letting the deputy steam. A brittle popping sound and a wilder burst of swearing from Fry caused Long Sam to look hastily around. The Indian buck, bloody as a stuck shoat, was stomping Joe Fry's derby to smithereens.

"The small paleface speaks with the forked tongue, for he does not give me much money, as he promised!" the Indian howled angrily. "For that I break this hard back from the turtle he wears for a thing palefaces call hat."

"Quit that, you heathen!" Joe Fry bellowed.

THE Indian quit, but not until the derby was a complete wreck. Long Sam chuckled drily, hearing the buck begin muttering sullenly in the Comanche tongue. Often wandering the lonely plains with seasoned traders, Long Sam had learned to speak the Comanche and other Indian languages rather well.

"You are like a little child, fighting that which cannot feel the blows you strike!" Long Sam chided the buck in Comanche. "What name are you called?"

"By palefaces I am called Comanche Tom!" the Indian retorted in broken English. "Two snows ago, I am scout for the white man's soldier-warriors."

"You'd have been better off staying with the troops as scout," Long Sam shrugged. "Where did this little paleface who speaks with the forked tongue get hold of you?"

"I was camped yonder, by the big river," the Indian chin-pointed northward. "I wait there to watch for you."

"Who put you there to watch for me?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"No tell!" the Indian grunted.

"Maybe you will, later!" Long Sam retorted coldly. "Did this little paleface here, come to your camp at the Red River?"

Long Sam jerked a thumb at Fry as he asked the question. The deputy squirmed and glared as the Indian nodded solemnly.

"Shut up, Injun!" Fry snarled.

"Go ahead, Comanche Tom," Long Sam urged. "This little paleface with the forked tongue showed you my picture. What did he want you to do?"

"Forked Tongue, that is be his name!" the Indian grunted. "He show me this you call picture, and say you will come by river soon. This, I know. But Forked Tongue say he give me much money if I follow you when you cross the river. I already know you carry much money, for killing you and getting it is why I am camped there. Forked Tongue says to follow you far this way, then kill you and he will give me much money besides what I take from you."

"I promised you money if you'd shag after this Littlejohn hellion and keep him busy until I could capture him, sure I did!" Fry snapped at the Indian. "But I never told you you could have the beef money Littlejohn is aimin' to steal from Norma Burrell, blast you!"

"The Forked Tongue has spoken again!" the Indian scoffed.

"Why do you keep saying I'm tryin' to steal Dan Burrell's beef money from his niece?" Long Sam asked Fry.

"As if you didn't know!" Fry hooted.

Comanche Tom suddenly bolted, streaking down the slope and out into the wet night. Long Sam half turned, sent a couple of shots winging over the Indian's head to keep him going away from there, then turned and shook the smoking pistol in Fry's face.

"If you want your own six-shooter bent across your thick head, Joe, just keep talking riddles!" the gaunt outlaw growled. "Did something happen to Dan Burrel while I was away?"

"His ranch was raided five days ago!" Fry muttered gruffly. "Every building burnt to the ground and every man on the place slaughtered."

"Indians?" Long Sam asked, voice thick from shock.

"Bart Edson and his Rail E crew, Burrell's only neighbors, claim Big Foot and his mixed Comanche and Kiowa raiders from over in the Territory, pulled the raid," Fry gritted.

"Judas!" Long Sam groaned. "Was Norma Burrell lucky enough to make her escape?"

"You know blasted well the girl escaped!" Fry snarled. "You've no doubt heard she's fool enough to be hangin' around here, dodging and running like hell anytime Bart Edson and his men try to get to her. You circled back, aimin' to butcher the girl."

"What in blazes are you talking about?" Long Sam rasped.

"You ain't kiddin' me, Littlejohn!" Fry howled. "Bart Edson and his men say Big Foot pulled that raid on Burrel's Slash B. If that Kiowa hellion did raid the ranch, you put him up to it so's you could keep Burrell's beef money!"

"Big Foot has been sneakin' over here into Texas on raids lately, you numbskull!" Long Sam retorted. "I understand Governor Coke has appealed to Jeff Maltby to take charge of a new Ranger battalion and hunt Big Foot down! I hope Maltby takes that job."

"You're the noose-bait Jeff Maltby had better take after!" Fry squalled. "Why Dan Burrell ever trusted a murderin' dog like you to help him out is more than I can figure."

"To begin with, Dan Burrell was one of the best friends I ever had," Long Sam said wearily. "On top of that, bandits have been pickin' off Texas cowmen who start home from Kansas with beef money in their pockets. Last Fall, Frank Grove, Dan Burrell's lifelong friend, was very likely murdered down here, somewhere. Grove's oldest son, Jay, was with him, and they were coming back from Kansas with a big wad of cash Grove got for a herd of his Block G cattle. The Groves, father and son, just disappeared. That hit Dan Burrell hard. He asked me to drive his Slash B herd to Kansas and bring back the cash, claiming my experience at lone-wolfing would let me slip through the bandits without them gettin' a whack at me."

"So you sneaked back and engineered a rain on Dan Burrell's ranch, wantin' to keep his beef money!" Fry charged.

LONG SAM turned swiftly away, knowing that he would lose his temper if he listened to much more of the deputy's talk. The outlaw stalked to where a tall gray horse, saddled and bridled, stood under the overhang, with the big bay Comanche Tom had ridden that day. The gaunt outlaw found his belts and holstered pistols on the gray's saddle, and hastily buckled them about his middle. He saw his hat and slicker lying nearby, and donned them, watching Fry all the while. He freed the fine bay of its only gear—a thong tied to its lower jaw and sent it plunging into the night with a slap of his hand.

"Get off my hoss!" Fry howled when Long Sam mounted the saddle on the gray.

The gaunt outlaw let his feet dangle down past the too-short stirrups, smoky eyes bitter as he looked at the angry deputy. He pulled Fry's pistol from his waistband, dismantled it, and tossed the pieces down among the rocks. He rode away then, his mind a sick turmoil over what had happened to fine old Dan Burrell.

"And Norma, running loose in these wild hills!" Long Sam groaned. "Maybe she was hurt during that raid, or shocked so bad her mind doesn't work right. I've got to find the girl, that's sure. But I'll have to find Sleeper, first."

Finding Sleeper was a tough assignment, as Long Sam had feared from the first. He worked out into the flats below the slope, riding slowly and calling or whistling to the old roan at short intervals. But it was past midnight, and he had already decided that he would have to wait until morning to continue the search, when Sleeper whinnied.

"Fry lugged me further than I reckoned he had!" Long Sam exclaimed. "But there's still time for me to make it across the hills to Dan Burrell's burned out ranch by daylight. And I'll sure as thunder keep Joe Fry's hoss with me, for I don't want him pesterin' me while I try to find Norma."

Long Sam made even better time crossing the hills than he had hoped to. The rain quit, and a good moon, peering through thinning clouds, accounted for his better time, he knew. When he rode into the broad valley where Dan Burrell's ranch buildings had stood it was still over an hour until dawn. Long Sam freed Sleeper and Joe Fry's gray of riding gear, then slumped down on the saddles, worry a bitter ache in him as he half-dozed and waited. When daylight finally spilled over the low, heavily timbered ridges and touched the meadows of the valley, Long Sam stood up, tight-lipped as he gazed at the black mounds of charred ruin that had been the Slash B buildings.

"Poor old Dan!" the gaunt outlaw murmured.

Long Sam cached Joe Fry's saddle, then picked up his own riding gear and moved off, looking for the horses. He saw them across the valley near a pine grove and plodded towards them, thinking the sooner he got started hunting Norma Burrell the better it might be. He hoped he could locate the girl before bumping into Bart Edson or any of Edson's Rail E men.

Bart Edson was a cold-eyed, tight-lipped man who had worked hand-in-glove with the carpetbaggers who came to power in Texas at the war's end. And Edson's two chief helpers at the Rail E, big, red-headed Ted Fagley and tough, pot-bellied Rod Goodwin, had been members of the professional terrorists the carpetbaggers had used as state police.

"Upset as I feel this morning, I couldn't be civil to such scum if I tried, so here's hoping I don't meet them!" the outlaw grumbled.

He caught and saddled Sleeper, then rode off into the piney woods, wondering just where and how to begin hunting Norma Burrell. He had traveled but a short distance when he heard riders off through the timber somewhere. The outlaw muttered and shunted his roan in behind a deadfall, then stepped out of the saddle. He peered out towards the trail he had traveled along before daylight, breath sucking in harshly when he saw three men.

"Bart Edson and his two pets, Ted Fagley and Rod Goodwin!" Long Sam gritted. "And they're readin' the sign Sleeper and Joe Fry's gray left on that trail."

The three riders halted just inside the timber. Bart Edson, tall and slim and expensively dressed, stood up in stirrups, peering off into the meadows beyond the pines. After a few moments he sat down on the saddle, turning cold eyes on his two hirelings. His thin-lipped mouth moved on words Long Sam could not hear. Ted Fagley spread huge hands, shrugging bullish shoulders. Squatty Rod Goodwin's thick lips moved as he made some sort of reply to whatever it was his employer had said. Long Sam heard another horse coming in along the trail just then, and saw Edson and his two men wheel their mounts, hands on pistol butts.

"It's our Injun, Comanche Tom!" Ted Fagley yelled.

"Yeah, and he's been hurt!" Rod Goodwin added.

COMANCHE Tom was on a sorry scrub pony he had managed to catch on the range, cruelly mauling the poor beast with a knotty club. The Indian shouted and waved a greeting to the three white men, who were spurring to meet him.

Long Sam sprang into the timber, running full tilt. When he finally dropped flat behind a scaly pine bole, he was within twenty yards of Bart Edson and the two Rail E riders, Ted Fagley and Rod Goodwin. The three whites had reached Comanche Tom moments earlier, and now they were shouting wildly, calling the dumfounded Indian hard names.

"Alright, boys, pipe down!" Bart Edson ordered finally.

"From what he's been sayin', the Injun must have bushwhacked Sam Littlejohn like we told him to, Bart, and got the Slash B beef money," Ted Fagley growled. "But what's the squinch-eyed scalp-snatcher yappin' about somebody he calls 'Forked Tongue' cheatin' him out of the money?"

"I knowed parkin' a dumb Injun up at the Red to snag Sam Littlejohn wouldn't work out!" Rod Goodwin declared.

"Shut up, you two, and let me question this Indian!" Bart Edson snapped at his hirelings.

Long Sam slid his famous pistols from holsters, smoky eyes coldly furious as the meaning of what he had heard became clear to him. He listened attentively while Bart Edson questioned Comanche Tom. The Indian gave a fairly accurate account of his adventures, referring constantly to Joe Fry as Forked Tongue, and calling Long Sam 'Tall Man' in his talks. Bart Edson and his two hirelings seemed to swell and bloat with rage as they listened. Comanche Tom watched them warily, fully aware of their anger.

"You blundering fool, I ought to shoot you!" Bart Edson exploded when Comanche Tom finished speaking. "Instead of doing what you were told to do, you let some fellow hire you to shag after Long Sam Littlejohn all day. Now Littlejohn is still loose, and has the money I wanted. How does this man you call Forked Tongue look?"

"He is but a small man, wide across like a fat squaw, and wears for the hat a thing that is hard like the back of a turtle," Comanche Tom replied.

"Bart, this dumb Injun got mixed up with Joe Fry, that deputy marshal who was around here huntin' Sam Littlejohn!" Rod Goodwin exclaimed.

"Fry tried to use the warwhoop somehow in a scheme to nab Littlejohn, I figure," Ted Fagley grumbled.

"From what this empty-skulled heathen says about Littlejohn having escaped and taking Fry's white horse with him last night, I reckon that gray we saw in the meadow out yonder is Joe Fry's mount," Bart Edson gritted.

"Then Littlejohn is around here somewhere!" Rod Goodwin cried.

"I'll put a bullet through this Injun to make certain he doesn't spill any more beans for us!" Edson bit the words out coldly. "But that will have to wait a while. We know that Norma Burrell shows up at the Slash B about this time each morning. She's no doubt watching

for Sam Littlejohn to get here with the beef money. We'll lay low and see if Norma shows up this morning. If she does, Littlejohn is apt to be watching, and we may get a chance to nab them both."

"You speak not with the tongue of a friend!" Comanche Tom declared angrily. "Yet when you tell chief Big Foot to bring all of us who follow him and come here to kill the palefaces and burn this place you call ranch, you swear that always you will be our great friend. When Big Foot hears me tell that you have the forked tongue, he will—"

"Bart, look yonder!" Ted Fagley exclaimed, pointing.

Long Sam glanced in the direction Fagley had indicated, barely smothering a yelp of alarm. Norma Burrell had ridden out of the meadow and into the heavily shadowed timber. She was following the main trail, leaning far out of the saddle to study the fresh sign of shod hoofs it held. Long Sam opened his lips to yell a warning at the girl, but saw that it was too late. Bart Edson and his two hirelings were charging the girl. She heard them and snapped erect in the saddle.

"Don't try running, or we'll shoot!" Bart Edson roared.

Norma Burrell was lifting a fine sorrel gelding on stiff reins, spinning the horse as it stood on slim hind legs. But the three Rail E men were already beside her, Rod Goodwin slamming his horse solidly against the sorrell before it could bolt away. Ted Fagley grabbed at Norma's arm as he swarmed past her, cursing when the girl plunged out of the saddle and hit the ground running. Fagley jumped his horse past her, then rolled out of the saddle. Norma whirled, and ran into the reaching arms of Bart Edson, who had dismounted and was closing in on her from behind. Rod Goodwin sat his horse, grinning at the furious way Norma was struggling. Comanche Tom rode up, watching without dismounting.

LONG SAM went down through the timber like a swift black shadow, guns in his hands, coldly furious but knowing he had to use prudence. He dropped behind a pine log scant yards from the girl and her captors, knowing that to show himself was to promptly start gun trouble. And with Norma in the thick of things, he dared not risk that.

"Let go of me, you murdering hound!" the girl cried out angrily.

Norma had on a divided buckskin skirt, a tan shirt that had been styled for a boy, and tiny black boots that were armored with big silver spurs. Her hat had been knocked off in the tussle, and blue-black curls swirled about her shoulders as she struggled against Bart Edson's powerful arms. Suddenly Edson released the girl and stepped back.

"Why did you call me a murderer, Norma?" he asked grimly.

"Because that's what you are!" the girl retorted.

"Paleface squaw talk too much with sharp tongue!" Comanche Tom declared.

He suddenly hurled the cudgel with which he had mauled his sorry mount. Norma saw the stick coming, and tried to dodge. It caught her a raking blow across one shoulder, toppling her over. Comanche Tom stepped off his horse and started towards her, but Bart Edson waved him back. Edson looked down at the crouching girl, face gray.

"Since the raid on your ranch, Norma, you've been holed up here in these hills," Edson droned. "Each morning you come to the meadows yonder, probably thinking Sam Littlejohn would be there with your beef money. But you've dodged me and the boys every time we've sighted you. Now you call me a murderer. Your uncle is alive, isn't he Norma?"

Norma did not flinch, yet Edson's questions frightened her. Long Sam knew that by the way the girl tensed against the earth, face paling quickly.

"You and these two ex-members of the terrorists will get no information out of me, Bart Edson!" the girl cried out.

"When Big Foot and his raiders swarmed over your ranch at dawn that morning Norma, I understand that your Uncle Dan shouted *my* name just as he

was shot down at one of the ranch house windows," Edson said harshly. "Tell me whether or not that happened, or I'll turn this Indian loose on you!"

"Of course that happened!" the girl flared. "I was at the window with Uncle Dan, helping fight those raiders. We were both looking straight at your paint-daubed face when you shot Uncle Dan!"

"If I had been there, masquerading as a painted Indian raider, you couldn't have recognized me!" Edson declared tensely.

"No?" the girl drove the words at Edson. "When you bobbed up beneath the window to shoot Uncle Dan, the fire you had helped set made the signet ring, there on your left hand, show up very plainly!"

"I'll be damned!" Edson choked.

Ted Fagley and Rob Goodwin swore, glaring at their boss. Edson ignored them, face drawn as he stared at the signet ring on his left hand. Then he looked at Norma. The girl shuddered.

"Obviously, Norma, your Uncle Dan is alive." Edson spoke slowly. "But he's evidently wounded badly, or you'd have lugged him down to the settlements, south of here. Where is your uncle?"

"You will never find Uncle Dan!" the girl declared firmly.

"You're a very beautiful girl, Norma," Bart Edson said. "Also, you're a stupid little rebel. But I've handled Texas rebels before. Rod?"

"What is it, boss?" Rod Goodwin asked.

Long Sam was already on his feet, pacing soundlessly towards the girl and her captors. His guns were palmed, his smoky eyes cold with fury as he advanced. Softly he hummed a range dirge, the sound carefully muted.

"Rod, convince Norma that she has to tell us where Dan Burrell is hiding," Edson ordered coldly. "Do it the way you used to convince Texas rebels that they could not hold out tax money on us."

Rod Goodwin moved so fast Long Sam Littlejohn was caught off guard. Goodwin plunged, looped a thick arm around Norma's slim throat from behind, and yanked the girl's head up against one of his thick thighs. He grinned down into her terrified face, pulling one of a brace of heavy pistols.

"Smash her mouth, Rod!" Bart Edson rasped. "She thinks we're bluffing, so do a damned good job."

"This'll hurt, sweetheart, but you asked for it!" Goodwin chuckled, and the heavy pistol swung upward over the girl's blanched face.

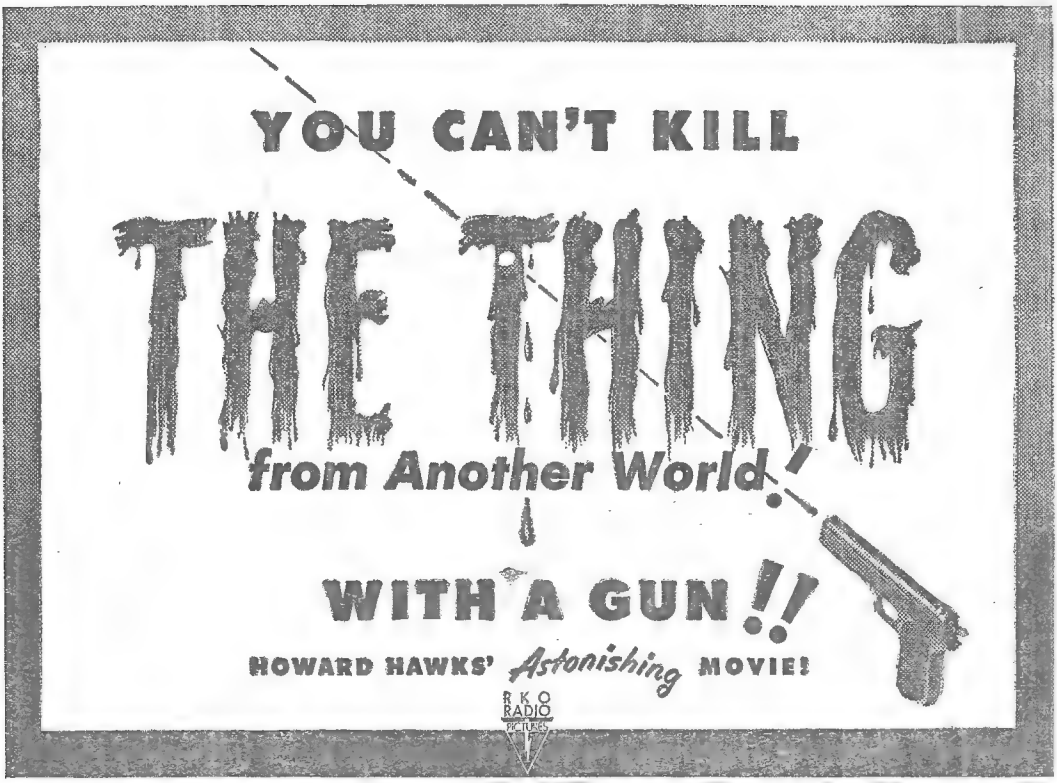
Long Sam Littlejohn's humming ended on a softly purring snarl. Rod Goodwin was grinning in an odd way, watching the girl's fear-filled eyes. The heavy pistol in Goodwin's hand poised but a split second, then started down just as the six-shooter in Littlejohn's right hand roared and jumped.

"Keep down, Norma!" the gaunt outlaw bellowed through the shot's thunder.

ROD GOODWIN crashed backwards, bleating as he clawed at a blood-spurting elbow that had been smashed by Long Sam's bullet. The pot-bellied scoundrel was almost fainting and Long Sam forgot him, turning bitter eyes on Bart Edson and Ted Fagley. They were cursing him at the top of their startled voices, each peeling a brace of pistols from leather. Comanche Tom was diving towards Norma Burrell, who spun out of his way but kept down low, as Sam had warned her to do. Ted Fagley and Bart Edson began shooting almost at the same moment, and Long Sam ducked when a bullet blistered his cheek.

"Rush him!" Edson was shouting. "Crowd the son, Ted!"

Long Sam snapped a shot at Bart Edson, but missed when a slug ripped into his side, throwing him off balance. The outlaw felt another bullet burn the top of his left shoulder, and still another tore the hat from his head. Ted Fagley was practically on top of him, broad face twisted in a savage grin of triumph as he thumb-fanned the hammers of his twin pistols. Long Sam drove a shot at Fagley that made the big man's mouth fly open, and started him stumbling and lurching in an odd way. Long Sam



hopped aside and knew that Fagley stumbled on past him and fell, but had no time to watch.

Bart Edson had hung back a pace or two, letting Ted Fagley spearhead the rush at Long Sam. Now Edson was darting off towards the thick bole of a big pine, alarm in his narrow, cold-lipped face. He fired at Long Sam with one pistol the moment the gaunt outlaw looked his way.

Long Sam's scalp tingled when the bullet went through his yellow hair. He smashed a shot at Bart Edson, and saw the man do a wild half-turn. Edson's right hand was gunless, badly twisted, and spurting blood. There was the dangerous fear of a cornered beast in Edson's eyes as he caught his balance, chopping down with his left hand pistol for another shot. Long Sam's eyes held a wickedly merciless anger as he drove a bullet into Edson's left hand.

"That's for a lot of Texans you and your hooded terrorists abused, robbed and murdered when you were in power, Edson!" Long Sam's voice lashed out, hard and bitter.

Bart Edson said nothing. He stood swaying there, eyes fixed in horror on his hands. They were twisted and bloody things, unresponsive to tensing muscle or the pull of tendons. Edson took one faltering step and pitched forward, whimpering. Long Sam turned away, the anger flowing from him now.

Rod Goodwin had passed out cold from the pain and shock of his bullet-smashed elbow. Big Ted Fagley lay on his back, and one look at the flaccid face was enough to tell Long Sam that there was one thief and killer who had hit the end of his rope.

Then the gaunt outlaw saw Norma Burrell, and his wide mouth grinned as he went towards her. The girl was standing over Comanche Tom, the very club with which he had knocked her down, earlier, clutched in her supple hands. The Indian had a couple of egg-sized lumps on his noggin and was faunching mad, but being very careful to keep

stretched out on his belly.

"Bust his head open, Norma, and let's see if there's a brain in it," Long Sam drawled.

Norma dropped her club and ran to him, putting her arms around him and holding tightly to him. She laughed through tears that made her eyes shine like diamonds.

"Sam, you're a wonderful sight!" she declared.

"Dan Burrell is all right, girl?" he asked quickly.

"Thank goodness, yes!" Norma nodded, stepping back. "He has a bad head wound and I was afraid to try taking him all the way to the nearest settlement. But he will be all right, Sam. You know about the raid?"

"I know about the raid," Long Sam nodded. "What I can't figure is why Bart Edson pulled such a stunt."

"Uncle Dan found the bodies of Frank Grove and Frank's son Jay!' Norma whispered, glancing quickly around.

"What's that?" Long Sam cried.

"About ten days ago, we had a cloudburst," Norma explained rapidly. "Uncle Dan was caught far over on our west range, and rode for the Rail E, wanting to get out of the storm. Bart and his men were all gone from the ranch, and Uncle Dan saw that the dirt dam of a horse pond Bart built last fall was being washed out. He tried to save the dam, but failed. When the water ran down he found the bodies of two men buried in the dirt of the dam for that pond, Sam."

"Dan could identify the bodies?" Long Sam asked grimly.

"Easily!" Norma told him, shuddering. "Uncle Dan and Frank Grove had been lifelong friends. In the grave with the two skeletons was a silver watch Uncle Dan gave Frank Grove, years ago. And a pistol on the other skeleton had hand-made bone grips that Uncle Dan made and fitted to a pistol young Jay Grove owned."

"Frank and Jay were murdered at the Rail E last fall!" Long Sam gritted. "The beef money they were carrying brought that on them, no doubt. And Bart Edson built a horse pond to hide the two bodies, more than anything else, I reckon. Did your Uncle Dan confront Edson with what he had learned?"

"He did!" Norma nodded. "Bart stalled and pretended great surprise, naturally. He begged Uncle Dan to wait a few days before reporting to the authorities, claiming he wanted to find the workmen who built that pond and have them ready for questioning."

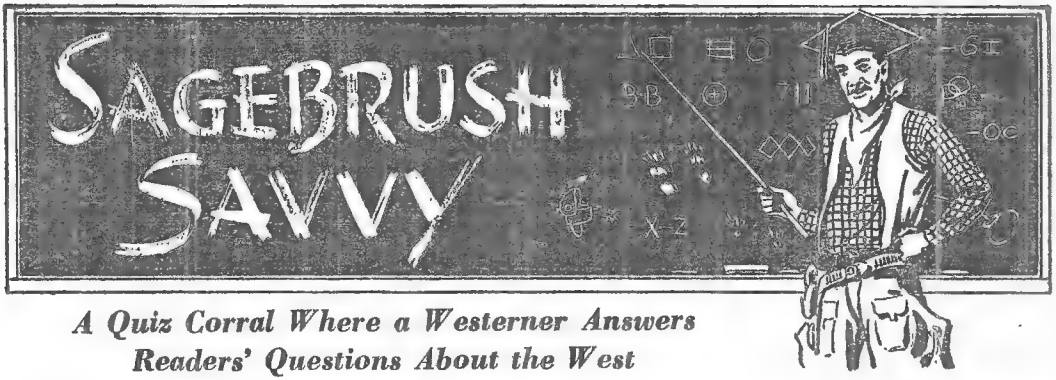
"Edson stalled so's he'd have time to get hold of Big Foot and pull that raid on your ranch!" Long Sam gritted. "But he didn't get Dan Burrell silenced, as he meant to. Let's gather up this bunch and get to wherever you're keeping old Dan, Norma. Bart Edson and these two hired hands of his won't bother Dan any more."

"Uncle Dan will be safe now, thanks to Long Sam Littlejohn!" Norma declared, eyes shining.

"I want no thanks, girl!" the outlaw shrugged. "I promised Dan Burrell I'd chouse his cattle up the trail and fetch back whatever money they brought. I came through, even if I did get skinned up a mite doin' it."

Norma reached up, put her slim hands behind Long Sam's head, and pulled his face down. She kissed him vigorously, full on the mouth. He ambled away a few moments later, mumbling something about getting his prisoners tied and wondering if his ears were as red as they felt!

**Stories of the Pioneer West in THE RIO KID WESTERN—
20c at All Stands!**



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Was Charley Siringo a Texas Ranger? —R. W. C. (Utah).

A.—No. Charles A. Siringo was a Western, horseback operative agent for the Pinkerton Detective Agency. He played an important part in breaking up Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch.

Q.—Is it true that in the days of the open range, cattle were more often branded on the left side than on the right, and if so, why?—A. H. G. (Calif.).

A.—Old-time branding records indicate that more cattle brands were burned on the left than on the right side, and old-timers tell me that the reason for it was that cattle in a held herd naturally "mill" or circle counterclockwise when disturbed by a cutter riding in among them, thus giving the cutter a better look at their left sides than their right. Hence left-side brands were favored as easier to see when cutting a herd.

Q.—My dictionary spells the word for an untamed horse, b-r-o-n-c-h-o, but in your magazine I see it spelled b-r-o-n-c-o, without the "h." How come?—M. R. (Mass.).

A.—I don't know how come some dictionaries do spell it *broncho,* but the reason that *bronco,* regardless of the dictum of any dictionary, is correct, is simply that it is originally a Spanish word and spelled that way in Spanish. Why throw in an "h" and make it sound like pneumonia? *Bronc* is also preferable to *bronk,* among Westerners.

Q.—What Western state has the highest altitude?—B. L. (N. Y.)

A.—If you mean what state has the highest single point above sea level, it is California, with Mt. Whitney, 14,501 feet. If you mean which state has the highest average altitude, it is Colorado, averaging well above 6,000 feet.

Q.—Which is larger, a panther or a cougar? —G. H. S. (Ohio).

A.—Panther, cougar, puma, mountain lion, catamount, Mexican lion, and catty-wampus are all just different names for the same animal.

Q.—How many kinds of cactus are there? —C. N. (N. J.).

A.—That's a prickly question, C.N., and I'm sort of stuck with it! I can't tell you exactly how many varieties of cactus there are, but 1,000 would not miss it much. A few of the better known are: cholla, tuna, prickly pear, organ, saguaro, cow's tongue, bisnaga, barrel, devil's head.

Q.—Is the bite of a rattlesnake always fatal?—K. J. L. (N. Y.).

A.—No, but it frequently is if not promptly and properly treated. The seriousness of a rattlesnake bite depends somewhat on the amount of venom injected by the snake's "hypodermic" fangs, and somewhat on the part of the body bitten. Modern treatment includes both suction to draw out the poison and anti-venin serum to counteract it. Doctors say that whiskey, traditional snake-bite remedy, is of no benefit.

Q.—Is it true that Will Rogers was part Cherokee Indian?—W. W. (Del.).

A.—He sure was—and proud of it.

—*S. Omar Barker*

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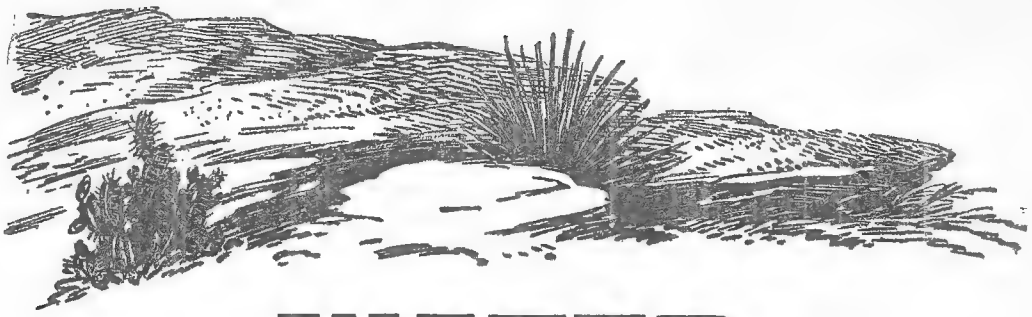
Perhaps the map was a fake, or perhaps somewhere in that parched valley was a buried spring with water to save a man's stock—and a girl's dying world!



WATER for HIS CATTLE

A Novelet by BARRY SCOBEE

CHAPTER I

Ancient Map

WHISKY ROW was only spottily lighted by the shine of coal oil lamps through doors and windows, but there was enough light for Johnny Welborn to see that he was being watched, or followed. A man in a sky-blue silk shirt and fawn-colored trousers had been too near him half a dozen times for it to be chance.

Johnny picked a saloon at random, not that he craved drink. It was common talk among soldiers and frontiersmen what he wanted—water for his cattle. Unless he heard of a new watering place for his little herd, the animals would soon be dried-out carcasses on the Southwestern desert, and he would be broke.

Johnny was steering his boots to a doorway when he saw a soldier with the yellow, sleeve-wide chevrons of a squadron sergeant-major entering a place farther along. Johnny's spurs jingled as hurried after the sergeant. He forgot about the watcher.

"Howdy," said Johnny, at the bar, elbow to elbow with the blue uniform. "This one's out of my pocket, Sergeant, if you'll drink with me."

The non-commissioned officer gave him a quick, hot stare. "See here, Mr. Civilian, I can buy my own poison." He took a second look. "Hey, you're the man who was in conference with the colonel this afternoon!"

"Did you hear what I was after?"

"Well, I'll admit I stretched an ear some. I'd been hoping I'd run across you."

"You and me both. I thought you might know more than your new colonel."

"I do. I have a copy of that water map you were asking about."

"The devil you say!"

Johnny was both pleased and skeptical, and instantly on guard. The colonel himself had never heard of the water map, though every cowman in the region knew the story.

Johnny had told the officer a long, long time back, a detachment of cavalry was scouting on the Rio Grande for a bunch of raiding Apaches. A sergeant and six privates had become detached from the troop and the Indians had given chase. Famished for water, the handful of soldiers had come to a great gushing spring in the middle of a long valley and quenched their thirst.

Miles farther to the north the Apaches overtook and wiped them out. As his last act, it was supposed, the sergeant left a penciled note and map of the big spring's location for the benefit of other scouting parties in need of water. When the main troop found their scalped and dying comrades they also found the note and map under a stone. But no soldiers or frontier cowmen had ever found the spring, nor discovered the slightest trace of its location. Either the Indians had stopped the flow in some unknown manner, to hide it from their enemies, the hated Yellowlegs, or the spring had been the delusion of a soldier crazed by thirst.

"You don't believe me?" the sergeant-major commented now, good humoredly.

"I believe there was a map, all right," Johnny conceded. "The commandant here at Fort Davis at that time made an official report about it."

"Correct. I've been on this post longer than it's rightly fair for any soldier to be stationed on any post. Away back, years ago, I was cleaning out some old files and ran across the missing map where it had got lost among a batch of reports. That map was dirty and had come apart at the folds. I made a copy of the thing and the scraps were burned with the other trash. Look here."

THE non-com drew from his blouse pocket a fold of paper, which he spread on the bar. It was in ink, neatly drawn.

"Here's the long valley. 'Soldier Valley' and 'Sergeant Spring,' they got to be called, just for names. Here's the two peaks that were the old sergeant's main landmarks. Between them is the wild cherry tree, see? An 'X' marks the spring. Now read what the sergeant wrote. I copied it dot for dot."

Captain—Long valley south from here. Great flowing spring by wild cherry tree between two high peaks—Sgt. Harmon, Troop B.

Before Johnny could study all the markings on the paper, the sergeant-major drew it away.

"I figured I might clip a coupon on it sometime," he said.

Johnny Welborn eyed the tough white paper. His future might be written on it—water and land and cattle. Or it might mean nothing.

"How do I know the map isn't a humbug?" he asked.

"In legal terminology," said the sergeant, "I certify it to be a true and correct copy of the original map that Harmon drew, to the best of my knowledge and belief."

Johnny gazed deeply into the soldier's eyes. They were steady eyes—true eyes. Johnny believed in their honesty.

"How much do you want for it?" he asked.

"One hundred iron men."

"I can't pay that much, Sergeant. I can't pay fifty. I'd have to dig the lint out of my pocket to rake up twenty."

"I thought you cowmen had cash to pave heaven with."

"I'm hardly a cowman. I've got sixty head of mixed stuff about a hundred miles from here. They'll be dead of thirst if I don't find new water. Regrets, Sergeant, but all I can say, is peddle your map somewhere else. There's plenty who need it."

The sergeant regarded him thoughtfully.

"Mister, the Indians are gone," he said at last. "Soldiers aren't needed in this

area any more. The medicine is strong that this post will soon be abandoned. Rumor has it my outfit will be moved to Nebraska or the Dakotas. Up there this map wouldn't be worth Adam's wilted figleaf. Cattlemen don't think much of us soldiers and we don't think much of cattlemen, but what's the diff? You need water for your muleys. I kind of shine to you, somehow. Here—a hundred bucks is just a hundred bucks to me, but to you this map—take it and pay me nothing."

"Hanged if I will, soldier. You're entitled to your profit."

"I'll down-the-chute with this one I've poured, then you can buy the drinks and we'll call it square."

He crammed the paper into Johnny's hand. A voice spoke sharply behind them.

"Hold it, Bellaire!"

It was the man in the sky-blue shirt, a muscular, smooth-fleshed, handsome devil, Johnny thought, if he ever saw one. Blue Shirt was a successful gambler, probably.

"Bellaire, here's a hundred for your map," the man said.

Hell was flaming up redly in the soldier's eyes. But his voice asked quietly of Johnny, as he thumbed at the man:

"You know this feller? Well, he's the beef contractor for the post here. I don't know his real John Hancock but he goes by the name of Lucky Leemay."

"Don't be offensive, Bellaire," the contractor said coldly. He slapped a sheaf of greenbacks across his hand. "There's your hundred, soldier. Give me the map."

"I haven't any map, Beef. I just gave it to a man. If I still had it I wouldn't sell it to you for a thousand, you slicker."

Leemay slapped the money at Johnny.

"I've got eight hundred head of beefs in Soldier Valley. I've had my eye on you ever since I found out you were here inquiring about that map. The hundred is yours. In fact, I'll raise the ante to two hundred for that doubtful, probably sham paper. Take a gamble, kid."

Two hundred dollars! That was more cash than Johnny had tamped in his pocket for a long time, more than he might see for years to come if his little herd perished. It was enough to dig a well, maybe get water and save his cattle. It might even save his future! But he shook his head.

"I couldn't sell a gift," he said, "if the giver wouldn't sell it to you. I'll take the gamble myself, on the map."

"I knew I'd sized you up right, cowboy!" The sergeant-major's face was light with triumph. "Watch this smooth hombre. I don't like to weep on your shoulder—but I had a wife once and I don't have her now. Neither does Leemay have her any more. Easy win, easy lose. I went out once to kill this pooney but decided in the nick of time that no woman is worth a military career. But I haven't entirely given up the idea yet about him."

Anger flamed up in the smooth face of the beef contractor. He took a step back, his eyes slitted.

"Maybe you'd better claw for your derringer, Bellaire."

Men along the bar bulged back from the line of fire. Bellaire's newly-filled whisky glass was before him.

"You mongrel!" he said, and dashed the glass' contents into Leemay's face.

Somebody bawled, "Soldiers!" Before Leemay could get the whisky wiped from his face a dozen blue-uniformed men were jamming around, eager for a brawl.

Leemay began backing off.

"Don't want to take a busting," he mumbled, and started for the door.

"Let him go, soldiers," Bellaire said.

"Sergeant, let's have the drink I mentioned," Johnny said to Bellaire.

"With pleasure, cowboy. But take warning from me. Watch Leemay!"

SANDY desert was a treadmill for Johnny Welborn's bay. There was desert behind, desert ahead, rolling forever under the horse's hoofs. Spanish dagger, yucca, sotol, thorny lecheguilla that always pointed up hill, surrounded the man on the horse. An occasional stunted cedar came to view and once in a

lonesome long while, a bunch of drouth-ridden cattle around a rocky creek-seep. Overhead arched a green and yellow sky that hadn't squeezed out a drop of rain in a year.

"Water or poverty," went Johnny's thoughts in the rhythm of the bay's feet. "Rain or ruin." He lifted his face to the glittering dome and laughed sardonically.

"Rain!"

He had chosen to go by Soldier Valley to size up the prospects for water there, entering through Needle Gap at the north end. A gracious valley rolled for miles below him, a level floor with a brown grass carpet worn threadbare in spots from heavy grazing. There were cattle everywhere, in dusty knots around wells. What a place it would be, if water were abundant! Mountain-protected pastures were here, lush grass, a home. He felt suddenly lonely with desire. Gosh, if he could find that old spring and grab the land!

He got out the map and compared it with the terrain, the sun on the white paper dazzling his eyes. Yes, there were the two high peaks, one on either side midway down the valley, looking like sullen owls. There was the main dry arroyo stretching down the middle of the land. That black spot far down shimmering in the heat waves, would be the wild cherry tree. Well, if it was all there according to Hoyle and Harmon why couldn't the spring be found?

Johny stopped at the first herd of cattle. Two men were drawing water with buckets from a shallow well for bawling, milling animals. With an angry plunk one of the men slopped a bucket aside for Johnny and his horse.

"Like givin' blood," he grumbled.

"But you've got plenty of the old wet," said Johnny.

"Plenty? Mister, don't be insulting. This here shallow bedsheet of water in this danged valley is wearing thinner than my levis. If it don't rain mighty quick, the red-headed birds is going to be eating our cows, and us too, mebbe."

"Why don't you open up that old Indian spring?"

The man jerked the emptied pail back into the shallow hole.

"I ain't wastin' my time gabbing to no fool," he clacked.

Johny found the same drouth-desperation at other herds. He rode on down to the wild cherry tree. Here and there naked-pated buzzards rose from cow carcasses. In a wide area around the tree he found broken ground, signs of old diggings, of labor by forgotten men. He rode back up the valley to green cottonwood trees and a house—the only habitation in the valley except cowcamp tents. Mesquite bushes and trees grew plentifully, with most of the foliage browsed off. His horse's hoof struck a wooden peg and knocked it from the silty ground. He got down to put it back. It had faded pencil figures in blue. As he made them out a man came jogging up, curious as an antelope.

"What yuh find, mister?"

"Section corner stake?" Johnny asked, holding up the peg.

"Sure. Some fool had this surveyed once, so's he could file on the spring, in case he ever found it. He spent royal money for a line clean down here from some baseline further north. It's on record in Fort Davis or Murpheysville. Thought maybe you'd found the spring. Everybody's watching everybody else."

"What if I had found it?"

"You'd have had trouble on your hands. Men'll race their horses eighty miles to the railroad to file on the section that's got the water. A spring would be worth more than all the livestock around here. Me, I've got two hunnerd head of fair cows but I'd swap 'em one and all for a glance at that old soldier map they say was at Fort Davis once."

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CHAPTER II

Failing Wells

AT THE cottonwoods Johnny found a neat adobe house and a red-haired girl in an old flop hat, levis and neat boots, with the strain of the drouth making her face look drawn and weary.

"You must be the old settler here," Johnny said from his saddle. "I see you have the only house."

"I've had it most of my life," she replied without spirit.

"The men I've met talk as if the shallow water is playing out."

"Why wouldn't it play out?" she retorted. "They've brought four thousand head into my country. Those cows are drinking the valley dry."

"I reckon they're desperate," said Johnny sympathetically. "But it's not right—robbing you. I hear that the beef contractor from Fort Davis has eight hundred head."

"There they are," she said shortly, motioning toward the middle west side of the valley.

Johnny could see a dozen bunches of cattle and dust-fog around the shallow wells.

"Why don't they all get together and find the old Sergeant Spring?" he asked her.

Her gray-green eyes flashed. "Don't say spring to me. It's something I don't care to hear mentioned."

"Would the old map do any good?"

"Map! There's no map. There never was. My grandfather never saw it. My father never saw it. They wasted their lives hunting for the spring. I hate the word."

Johnny sensed tragedy. He had been trying to make her feel better.

"But if your folks had found it," he said, waving an arm down the valley, his eyes warming and glowing at the land, "you would sure have had something—grass, shade, irrigated feed crops, hills to shelter stock in winter. If there was a map do you suppose the spring could be found?"

"There's no map I tell you! If you had it—well, could the gods of ancient Greece be discovered now with a map? The spring is a myth. I won't talk about it."

She gave him her slim back, walking away wearily. Johnny thought of showing her the paper but decided against it. In the first place, it was his map. In the second place, she might claw him, or tear it up. Lastly, he didn't have time to do anything with the map today. He had to get on to his own camp at Green Bottle Spring, fifteen miles to the east, and see if the water there was still holding out.

Johnny reached his camp in mid-afternoon. He had arrived here first in March, drifting his seventy-five head from counties to the eastward, hoping to find good land to file on. Now he found his Mexican cook asleep under the wagon and his other Mexican sitting on the fence that enclosed the spring, smoking a shuck cigarette dolefully. The cattle surged about, bawling.

"*No mas agua,* no more water," the smoker intoned drearily. "The spring, she dry oop purty quick all for once. Git hole in bottom, perhaps."

Johnny glared at the man. "Hole in the bottom? Did you use dynamite?"

"For sure. What the diff? She don't got no more water, Johnny. We think perhaps little dynamite make her spit some more. Two sticks, *no mas.* It don't do no good. Water slide back in ground, perhaps so."

"For heaven's sake," said Johnny, weakly.

There wasn't even any water for a drink for himself and the bay.

"Soldier Valley for John Deeds Welborn and two dynamiting hombres—move!" he said crisply. He and José had hard work of it getting the herd started away from the smell of water. The low sun was still hot against their noses as they finally shoved off. The cook was

already almost out of sight with the wagon, weaving over the roadless range.

It was after midnight, Johnny guessed, when on the slow drag he saw in the bright moonlight the glow of a fire a long way ahead. Now what? he wondered. Had the wagon broken down? Or had a wheel lost a tire? Was the cook lighting a campfire? But why such a big one?

At daylight the answer lay before him. The wagon was burned to its irons, with everything in it. Only a smolder of heat and ashes was left. The mules' harness lay on the ground, but the mules were gone. The teamster-cook lay dead nearby, shot through the chest.

Johnny had left his precious water map in the pocket of an old coat and hung the coat on a bow of the covered wagon.

His thought jumped instantly to "Lucky" Leemay. That man had been the only person, except Sergeant Bellaire, to know about the map.

The new sun was warming their backs when Johnny and Jose pushed the weary, bawling cattle through the rim and into Soldier Valley. The many herds of the many owners were not jamming around the wells; they were in loose, still bunches, standing around or lying down. No tiny figures of men were at the distant wells.

"Played out," Johnny knew drearily. *"No mas agua."*

A long skirmish line of riders, stretching completely across the valley, was riding slowly southward, far off, like attacking cavalry.

"Drift our cattle down to the cottonwoods," Johnny told Jose. Then he spurred his limp-kneed horse out across the flatland.

THE red-haired girl was standing at her picket gate in the cool of the morning.

"The wells have played out," she told Johnny, drearily, recognizing him.

"Tough," he said simply, and did not worry her with his own troubles. "What are the riders down there looking for? There must be fifty of them."

"The spring," she said, tonelessly.

He saw three or four horses in a corral beyond the house.

"Miss, what's your name?"

"Dalghren—Sargie Dalghren," she said.

"My horse is dead on its legs, Miss Dalghren. May I put him in your pen and take one of yours, to join those men?"

She nodded. He got his saddle on to a strong stocking-leg sorrel. When he was ready to ride, he returned to the girl.

"Do you know that beef contractor from Fort Davis, Leemay?" he asked her.

"Who doesn't? He rode down the valley at daylight organizing the hunt for the spring. It's the last hope, which is no hope at all."

"Rode down the valley?" Johnny murmured. "Did you notice from what direction?"

"No. He didn't stop here. I recognized him—he always rides a black horse. Usually he wears a loud shirt. He didn't this morning."

Johnny rode down the valley at a long lope. The shapes of the riders were fairly distinct in the clear dry atmosphere. He kept looking for a figure that might be Leemay. Presently he saw the line was breaking up, the horsemen beginning to drift together into groups. He stopped. Leemay's camp was to his right rear. If the man were down there, he would be coming back this way.

Then back up the valley a mile or so, and out in the middle, Johnny saw a figure suddenly rise above the mesquite growth—a man mounting his horse. Without thinking, just from instinct and habit, he lined the figure up with a crag in the eastern rim. When the rider, disappearing and reappearing in the mesquite, finally emerged he recognized Lucky Leemay. Trying to keep hidden as much as possible, Leemay headed straight for his own camp.

Johnny angled in that direction. Leemay had a much shorter distance to go and beat him to the collection of wagons and tents. Johnny was still three hundred yards away when a sharp explosion sounded and rolled over the valley, bumping the hills and bouncing back. Then an-

other, and a third. Dynamite being exploded on the ground, for no gun short of a cannon could make that much sound. Three shots were always a signal. Johnny glanced back. Riders all along that broken line were heading toward the shots.

Then Leemay, back on his horse, came darting out to meet Johnny.

Leemay pulled up his horse square in front of Johnny's sorrel. His full-fleshed face was hot and his eyes were hard and prying.

"You!" he said. "I'll raise my ante to five hundred dollars for that map."

"Knowing you're safe," said Johnny.

"If this crowd knew you had it, Wilburn, or Wallborn, or whatever your name is, they'd wolf you to get it."

"They'd tear you up to too, Leemay."

"What do you mean, feller?"

"My wagon was burned last night. My driver was killed. The map was taken. You were seen coming into the valley at daylight, past Miss Dalghren's place."

It was more than Leemay had expected. Confusion raced around in his dark hot eyes. He switched the subject somewhat.

"Hombre, stay away from Miss Dalghren," he said. "My brand is on her. Don't go gabbing to her any of that stuff that lying sergeant-major in Davis told you. Hear me?"

"Miss Dalghren isn't concerning me right now, Leemay."

"What is?"

"That map."

"If you're accusing me, feller, make it flat."

"It's flat."

Fury burned in Leemay's face. His glance slid past Johnny, who could hear horsemen pounding along behind him.

"What was that signal, Leemay?" one of them shouted. "You find the spring?"

Leemay's glance came back to Johnny.

"I ought to kill you!" he said, low and tight-voiced. "Get away from my camp. Be heeled, if I meet you in this valley again."

Johnny grinned. Leemay bridle-hauled his black horse around and scampered back to his wagons. Riders flitted past Johnny. Others were coming pell-mell to see about that signal, men facing the loss of their herds, and ruin, and wild to find out if water had been found.

When a dozen had passed him, Johnny joined the stampede up to Leemay's outfit. Already the beef contractor was up on one of his wagons speaking to the crowd.

"Gents, you can see that your cattle will be dead of thirst in a day or two," he was saying. "If you want some bread and butter money I'll pay you a dollar a head for them, cash on the nail keg. All you got to do is sign a bill of sale."

"Why the charity, Leemay?" somebody called.

"The charity is to myself. If I can't sell beef to soldier boys and make an honest dime, I can sell hides to the market and make a penny."

"Like tarnation you can!" another voice drawled. "By the time you'd pay for the skinning of the carcasses, and hauling your hides to the railroad cars, and shipping east, you'd be owing yourself."

"If I want to take a chance that's my lookout," Leemay called over the derisive laughter. "If you want a dollar for a dying cow, step up and wet your pencil."

"By hanks, I'm going to take him up and get out of this pest hole," a ragged, rawboned cowman declared and pushed his way to the wagon.

Others began to crowd in eagerly, saying a dollar was better than dead cows.

CHAPTER III

Race For Town

JOHNNY eased unobtrusively away from the fringe of the crowd. Getting the wagon's bulk between him and Leemay he lifted the sorrel again into a long lope. More men were coming to investigate the dynamite shots. He avoided them and rode hard to the spot where he had stopped and seen Leemay pop up to his saddle in the thickest and highest of the

mesquite growth. There, he headed beeline for the crag his idle attention had marked.

"As sure as shooting that slick contractor used my map and found that spring," he told himself. "He's taking a chance on finding water when he has the cattle bought up, swindling every man who'll sell to him."

When he reached the high mesquites where he thought Leemay had remounted he got down and went peering along the cow paths for boot prints.

The wild cherry tree he had ridden to the day before was something like three-quarters of a mile up the valley and to the northwest. That puzzled him. The old-time sergeant had said "spring by wild cherry tree." He wouldn't have meant this far from it.

An explanation popped into Johnny's mind. Maybe there had been two cherry trees! Perhaps that old one Sergeant Harmon had seen had perished long ago. That one up there now might not be the landmark at all. Leemay might have found some other markings on the map—Johnny hadn't taken time yesterday to compare it thoroughly with the terrain. He hadn't wanted anyone to see him looking at it.

Abruptly Johnny stopped and looked down at tracks. The prints undoubtedly were made by Leemay's small, neat boots. They were sharp-cut in the silty surface. He followed them without trouble, where they meandered here and there, roughly in a circle that became a spiral and narrowed and narrowed. The tracks presently led to an outcrop of brown rocks. They were all but hidden by a luxurious growth of brush. He saw where Leemay had squatted and jiggled into the growth on his heels, inches at a time. He went in the same way, and found himself in a tiny rincon of the rocks. It was half-oval in shape, about as wide and long as a farm wagonbed.

Johnny saw where the light silty ground had been clawed away from one wall, then pushed back. He clawed it out again. A black watermark appeared—such a stain as he had seen on the rocky sides of many a spring pool.

Back on more open ground Johnny followed the continuation of the tracks. They went straight southwest for thirty or forty feet. He saw little holes that had been newly gouged into the ground. In a moment he picked up the freshly-sharpened stick that they had been gouged and punched with.

Then he saw something else which explained the secret of the lost spring. Plainly Leemay's stick had jabbed into very loose ground. He had scraped earth away with his hands, earth and charcoal. There, six or eight inches below the surface, was the charred and dry-rotted stump of a tree. He could see shavings, where Leemay had whittled them off to see the color of the wood—yellowish shavings, the color of wild cherry roots of this region, without a doubt.

That map, Johnny told himself, had been very revealing. It had led the sharp mind of Leemay to the exact spots the old sergeant had indicated. Johnny stood up and looked at the two peaks, one on either side of the valley. He seemed to be exactly between them. True, he had seemed to be exactly between them yesterday when he was at the cherry tree up the valley. But he could see that he was more nearly so now. It had been the absence of the cherry tree here—which the Apaches in their savage cunning had destroyed, and the presence of that one up there—that had thrown off all the searchers for the "great spring."

Johnny tied his black silk neckerchief to a mesquite branch near the hidden rincon, to mark the spot, while his thoughts went in a circle of repetition.

"You've got the world by the tail," they kept telling him. "You've got the world by the tail!"

Then by an effort he regained control of himself and started riding. He must get the section number. He remembered about where he had seen the corner stake the day before. From its location he was not long in finding the one that marked the northeast corner of the spring section.

With it in mind he rode for the cottonwoods, his mind made up to a course of action.

The red-haired girl was not at home. Her Mexican said she had gone over to Leemay's camp to see what the three loud shots had been for and why the men were gathering there.

Jonny's man, Jose, had drifted the cattle down near the house. It was no more than mid-forenoon. He told the two men he had located the spring. They stared in unbelief. He told them to get dynamite from his wagon, and a crowbar, and go down into the thickest and highest of the mesquite and find his black scarf. He told them how to place half a dozen deep shots between the rincon and the edge of the adjacent rock-bottomed ditch, and in what order to fire them. He had full trust in Jose. The man was dependable and an old hand with dynamite in hunting for water.

WHEN they had started on their way, he entered the house gingerly, disliking to intrude, and wrote a note on a scrap of brown wrapping paper.

Miss Dalgreen—Maybe it isn't spelled right—the spring has been found. I meant to tell you so you could ride to town and file on the land. You aren't here; I have sent our Mexicans to blast out the spring. If there's water all the cattle will be saved. I am riding your sorrel. I will file on the spring section for you and on some sections below for myself. You are entitled to the water. All I ask is for you to see that my stock gets to the water when it is free.—John Welborn.

P. S. On second thought I'll help myself to some of your food.

He found half-warm coffee and biscuits and bacon on the yet simmering stove, and the ever-present pot of brown beans on any ranch stove in the Southwest. Afterward he filled his canteen, thrust the note between the mesquite pickets of the front gate—there was no wind—and rode. . . .

At his cowcamp Lucky Leemay had been in something of a sweat to keep an eye on the doings of that pestiferous Johnny What's-his-name and at the same time to pay out money for cattle.

He had seen Johnny enter the mesquite thicket, and cursed within himself. Why hadn't he killed the young fool? Then he saw Johnny ride to Sargie Dalghren's. True, Sargie was right here and Johnny wouldn't see her, but it was bad, all the same. Now Johnny, on the stocking-legged sorrel, was riding toward Needle Gap, and town! The girl had vanished. No, there she was riding off with a man who had refused to sell out for a dollar a head. Johnny Smart Alec was heading for town to file on the land that had the spring.

"It's my spring!" Leemay told himself savagely. "It's mine by right of discovery, by right of might and grab. I'll have it or know the reason why!"

"That's all, gents," he said suddenly to the bitter men. "My iron biscuits have played out. But I know where I can raise enough more to take care of you." He winked and thumbed toward the house at the cottonwoods. "If you'll hang around till I get back I'll have what it takes to get you a ticket out of this blasted valley of death.

"That's a neat trick to keep them quiet until I can get away to a head start," Leemay told himself.

He entered his tent and changed to a bright red shirt, making certain to get his little notebook with the section numbers of the land. By the time he rode eighty miles or so and filed on the land, and got back here, half the cattle would be dead. But what was the difference? The land, the spring alone, was worth more money than ten times that many cattle. By the time he got back, most of these grumbling, savage men would have taken their chuckwagons and beds and pulled out. They were too much the born cowmen to stay and see their stock die.

Yes, it all looked pretty blamed luxuriant for one Lucky Leemay!

At the upper end of the valley Johnny Welborn was telling himself that he shouldn't be riding away and letting Leemay swindle the stockmen at a dollar a

head. But if there turned out to be water, when the spring was blown out, the cattlemen would sense the swindle. They would settle it with Leemay, and they were tough hombres.

Also, Johnny's thoughts went along, maybe he wasn't entitled to any land below the spring. Maybe, rightfully, it all should go to the girl. Poor worried redhead, here in this drouthy world with a lot of tough men.

"Hang it!" he thought. "Why can't life be simple, without questions always coming up?" Well, he had one satisfaction. He'd fixed it so the cattle would get water —if that old spring would flow life-giving water again.

Then he saw, off to his left, a man in a red shirt riding a black horse. It was Lucky Leemay, pounding the earth for Needle Gap! Lucky Leemay was riding to town to grab the spring!

Johnny set spurs to the sorrel. Good grief, he couldn't race Leemay all the way to the railroad! The horses couldn't stand it. This would soon be a killing pace, under the hot nooning sun.

Johnny Welborn and Leemay were going to point their V at the Gap just about together. They were converging rapidly.

Presently they were no more than a hundred yards apart. This became seventy-five. Became fifty. Belatedly Johnny thought of his six-gun. It was in the saddle-pocket. Then Leemay began suddenly to shoot.

Johnny lunged the sorrel into the brush. He twisted and zig-zagged, bending low in the saddle, making himself a hard target.

Three, four—five—six shots. Johnny counted, and knew that Leemay's gun must be empty. He split from the brush and rode headlong for the red shirt. Leemay was trying to push cartridges into his pistol. He saw that he couldn't make it. With Johnny right at him he flung the heavy gun at Johnny's face. Johnny ducked it. Johnny threw out his right arm. The heel of his hand took Leemay across the nose. Leemay almost went out of his saddle.

JOHNNY hauled his horse around. Leemay was riding for his thrown-away gun. Johnny lunged up beside him. Against him, with a thud of flesh and leather. Johnny bent and tried a cowboy trick. He jerked Leemay's foot from the stirrup. Then he took a handful of the red shirt and hauled Leemay from the saddle.

Leemay landed on his side, but hung to a bridle rein. The whirling black dragged him. Leemay struggled to his feet. By that time Johnny was off the sorrel and hurling Leemay's six-gun far off into the brush. Then he had his own gun in his fist.

Slowly Leemay climbed back into the saddle.

"You haven't got the stuff in you, kid, to shoot me," he told Johnny.

"Not in cold blood," Johnny admitted, looking at his enemy.

He jumped the sorrel suddenly past Leemay and got into the narrow gap.

"But you'll not ride through this slot, Leemay. Try rushing me and it won't be the horse's leg I'll bust with a bullet."

Leemay studied him, squint-eyed. "You found the spring too," he said. "We could go to town and file on it together. Let's be partners."

"You forgetting Miss Dalghren?"

"I intend to marry her."

Johnny laughed. "Leemay, I've got throw-holds on you. If we sit here long enough, skylined in the gap, somebody will trot up here to see what's got us nailed down. They're looking already. Probably they heard your shooting."

Immediately two riders started away from the nearest herd below them, gazing up toward the gap curiously.

"Blast it!" Leemay shouted. "Listen, man, let's go back and make sure that spring is still wet before we go off half-cocked. We'll tell these fellows nothing."

"He's playing for time," Johnny thought. "I can't go on to town now. He'll follow me. I'll go back and try to get word to the girl to make the ride herself."

"All right," he said. "Keep ahead of me, Leemay. Head straight for the spring."

They rode fast. They avoided all riders. They got within a half mile of the old spring. Then in the hot noon silence there came a sharp shot, then another and another, then a great thundering boom rolling over the valley, thumping the hills and tumbling back.

In the vast shocked silence, with the bawling of the cattle stopped like a catastrophe, whitish smoke rose above the mesquite at the site of the spring.

CHAPTER IV

The Girl Makes an Offer

OUT in the valley, under the cottonwoods, Sargie Dalghren lay on a hammock made of barrel staves and smooth wire. This was the end for her. Her little bunch of cattle would be nothing but drying carcasses within a day or two. It would end her life here in this valley where Dad and Granddad had thrown away their years hunting for water in a mirage.

That beef contractor over there, buying men's cattle at a dollar a head. Men quitting, men in black despair. She'd refused to sell. Leemay hadn't even made an offer, she'd ridden away before he could. After all, maybe Leemay was her way out of all this. He liked her. He was well-to-do. He was handsome. But there was something repelling about him.

That young man, now, who passed by yesterday and again this morning, he'd been polite and different. For a little he had given her a feeling of confidence But that was past. She'd seen him riding away, on her horse, toward the gap, hitting for town no doubt to file on this land, taking a chance on that old mythical spring being found. The fool! He was nothing but a waster! Maybe he was also a horse thief. The bitter taste of a vague disappointment was on her tongue.

A tiny wisping sound caused her to sit up. A whirlwind was making, out there beyond the fence. Other wraiths of the drouth were starting up over the valley. The near one gathered force quickly. It struck and rattled the gate. Snatched a scrap of paper from somewhere. Paper? What was a piece of paper doing here?

A whirling cloud of dust crowded along the side-fence, crouching, slinking along as if afraid of a human being because of its drouth-guilt. It darted from the fence and ran for the house. It broke against the wall. The scrap of paper teetered like an autumn leaf to the ground. She hurried to snatch it up and read:

"Miss Dalgreen—found old spring—going to town to file on land for you—please see my cattle get water—John Welborn."

An echoing shot split the air. Then came another and another. Next she heard a thundering boom which stilled the cattle, like a threat of disaster. Smoke was rising over the mesquite down there. She ran to her dapple-gray, ready saddled. As she rode away a poignant regret filled her heart—that her Dad and Granddad should have missed this day.

Johnny Welborn, Lucky Leemay and a crowd of other men sat their saddles looking at the wreckage. It consisted of torn mesquite bushes and roots, stones, yellow-gray caliche earth that was like cement, ashes and bones and flint shards and broken arrowpoints, the stuff that Apaches had tamped in, as was their custom, to seal and hide a spring from their enemies, the cavalry.

A head of water began to come through the loosened earth, bulging out like a living, crawling thing. It washed debris aside. It plowed and pushed its muddy way toward the rock-bottom ditch over there that had carried away the flow long ago.

"Golly!" cried a man, and wheeled his horse away. "Water for my cattle."

The increasing, muddy flow reached the natural creek-drain in a great heaving volume. There was enough water for ten thousand head, somebody muttered.

Johnny looked around for Leemay. The man was just edging away from the gaping crowd.

"Stop him!" Johnny shouted.

Leemay hammered spurs against the black. A half dozen men riding up from that side, hearing the warning, closed in instantly. Leemay, quick as they, lunged at a rider and snatched a revolver from a holster. "Easy!" he fumed. "Easy, and nobody gets hurt. This spring is mine and I'll have it!"

The crowd stirred angrily under his leveled gun.

"He was buyin' our stuff at a dollar a head!" a man shouted. "He knowed about this spring all along!"

"He'll take his money back!" bawled another.

"I'll have my cows ag'in or I'll have him!"

Leemay pointed his finger at Johnny. "He's the guilty man. He got a copy of the old map from a soldier in Davis."

Wrathful faces turned on Johnny.

"That's right, as far as it goes," Johnny told them. "I left it in my wagon. The wagon was burned last night. My driver was killed. Leemay stole the map and found the spring."

"That's a lie. He hunted out the spring. He had it blasted out so his cattle could drink while he pulled out for the railroad to file on the land. I overhauled him and brought him back."

"Hang the cheat!" a rider growled, spurring toward Johnny.

"Hold it!" Johnny warned him. "Leemay killed my driver, stole the map, and burned my outfit." Johnny let that soak in, then took another chance at accusing. "You'll find the map in his shirt pocket."

A gnarled hand reached out and ripped off Leemay's pocket. Only a little memorandum book dropped out.

"See," said Leemay. "That's the size of all his accusations."

In the stillness Johnny knew that he had lost, unless one more chance saved him.

"Leemay had that map," he asserted. "Maybe he threw it away. Maybe it's in another pocket."

"What's this?" The same gnarled hand went to Leemay's hip. Clawed something from the pocket. A fold of white paper.

LEEMAY didn't wait. He whirled his horse to escape, but the riders blocked him. He swung back and his gun blasted at Johnny. A fist knocked the gun spinning. With a wild cry, Leemay whirled the powerful black again, and knocked his way through the riders.

A dozen men rode after him. One was waving a sheaf of money. Leemay's horse was fast. Some of the men, on scrawny beasts, began to slow down. But six or seven kept pounding. Grim and determined men. Then they were hidden by the dust of their horses' hoofs.

There was still a crowd of men around. One of them looked at Johnny.

"Reckon Leemay's running washes your face. Besides, you opened this spring for our cattle."

"How about title to this land?" somebody asked, and it started an excited stir.

"I can save you trouble about that."

Men turned, surprised at a woman's voice. The red-haired girl sat her saddle near Johnny. "My father took up six sections here long ago," she said. "I own it now. The spring is included."

She held up a scrap of brown wrapping paper for Johnny to see. The strain of the drouth had cleared somewhat from her face. She seemed pleased, Johnny thought.

"I need a foreman to look after my stock," she said. "Would you like the job, Mr. Welborn, with the right of having your own cattle too?"

"Why—uh—" Johnny faltered.

"You almost have to take it," she told him, her gray-green eyes dancing at his confusion. "You see, Granddad and my father had a standing offer that whoever opened up the spring got half of the title to it."

Johnny flushed. Men chuckled. The girl was waiting for an answer, smiling and pleased, and amused too. Johnny began reining his horse away.

"First thing," he said, "I've got to get my cattle down here for water. And yours too, if I'm going to be your foreman. And don't let me forget that I owe a soldier in Fort Davis a hundred dollars for a map."

Blind Man's Bluff

By L. ERNENWEIN

The case of Ace High Halliday was a tough one for the old lawman

EVENING'S first coolness drifted down from the shadowed slopes of the Fandango Hills as Sheriff Sam Odegarde rode into Broken Bow. The lawman's leathery, lantern-jawed face held a worried frown as he observed the radical changes which had taken place during the week he'd been away.

Because a railroad was building west through Broken Bow, scores of new canvas and clapboard structures had sprung up almost overnight, their gaudy signs and flamboyant banners giving Main Street a carnival camp appearance. Brawny con-

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struction workers and store suited strangers of all types tramped the plank walks, paying no heed to the old man with a star on his vest. It seemed odd that Sheriff Sam should ride half the length of the town's wide thoroughfare without seeing a man he knew; uncommon odd.

"She's turned into a regular danged boom camp," he mused morosely.

But that startling fact didn't cause the haunted look in Sheriff Sam's faded, age-dimmed eyes. Broken Bow, he reflected, wasn't the only thing that had changed during these past two weeks.

Dust haze hung above Main Street as it always did at this time of day, so that Sheriff Sam failed to notice the new sign which said HALLIDAY'S ALHAMBRA until he was directly in front of it. The old lawman peered at the saloon in the squinting way of a man reluctantly confirming something he'd expected to see—and regretted seeing.

"Wish Ace-High had stayed at Kicking Horse Canyon," he muttered, and riding on to Dude Mulqueen's Livery, put his horse away.

Dude, he guessed, was at supper. And so were the rest of this town's old-time citizens. Folks hereabouts always kept to their regular habits and they'd probably continue to do so, boom or no boom. It occurred to Odegarde that he'd eaten nothing since breakfast, way back at a sheepherder's camp in the hills. But he had no desire for food. In fact there was only one thing he wanted, and needed urgently—rest.

Wearily, in the absent-minded way of a man walking a familiar route from long habit, Sheriff Sam crossed the dusk-hazed street and entered his office at the jail. Lighting the bracket lamp above his spur-scarred desk, he slumped into a swivel chair that creaked protestingly at his weight.

"Old," the sheriff said, "just like me. Old and wore out."

HE PICKED up the half dozen letters which had been deposited on his desk and absently shuffled them, making no attempt to open and read them.

"Wanted circulars," he muttered. "And complaints about things that can't be helped—like that dead sheepherder in the hills above Kicking Horse Canyon. I'm almost sure one of Ace-High Halliday's housemen trailed him up there and shot him for the roll he'd won at Halliday's poker game. But I couldn't find a danged bit of proof in a whole week of searchin' high or low."

Which was when Doc Plunkett, better known as "Parable" Plunkett, stepped into the office and announced: "Welcome home, friend Samuel! What glad tidings of good cheer do you fetch from the hinterlands?"

"None," Odegarde muttered dejectedly.

"Ah—so another bandit failed to bite the dust," Plunkett consoled. "Don't let it bother you, Sam. There are bigger and better things to worry about, right here in our midst."

"Such as what?" Sheriff Sam inquired.

The old medico took off his stovepipe hat and flicked a speck of dust from its faded fabric.

"Tumultuous times have come to Broken Bow," he reported pompously and took time to tighten the black string tie which encircled his slightly soiled batwing collar. "Greed and gore ride hand in hand, trampling civic pride into the sand."

Odegarde smiled and waited, knowing well that Parable would eventually get around to telling the news, even though it might be slightly exaggerated.

"But as I have said before and now repeat," Plunkett proclaimed. "Pride is a braggart's bauble—a tinseled trinket worn by witless fools who fear the inevitable disintegration of their crumbling courage!"

"Quite so," Sheriff Sam agreed, enjoying the familiar bombast of this old friend.

The railroad, Odegarde reflected, had changed Broken Bow from a quiet cowtown into a bustling boom camp. But it hadn't changed Doc Plunkett. Nothing, he guessed, could alter the parable-spouting old medico.

"Speaking of pride," Plunkett continued, "reminds me that I have a patient at the Mansion Hotel teetering betwixt life and death. A railroad marshal named Blake who has more pride than seven strutting peacocks."

"What happened to Jeff Blake?" Odegarde demanded, urgently interested.

"He enforced the twelve o'clock curfew last night by shooting out the chandelier at Halliday's Alhambra," Plunkett reported. "This morning Blake endeavored to arrest Ace-High Halliday but was intercepted by a brash bully named Bart. The marshal killed Bart, but not before Bart had shot Blake three times. I removed two of those slugs. The third one went right through him."

Sheriff Sam's worried frown deepened into a scowl that rutted his gaunt cheeks.

"Jeff Blake is a good peace-officer," he muttered. "One of the best. I hope yuh can save him, Doc."

"Rest assured that I shall do my utmost, ably abetted by Kate Finucane who keeps constant vigil at Blake's bedside," Plunkett declared. "Although I have a poor opinion of romantic notions I must confess that Marshal Blake has a beautiful reason for wanting to recover. A very beautiful reason indeed."

The old medico turned to the doorway. "I must go see how the patient is doing," he said. Then, just before he went out, Parable added slyly, "Inasmuch as you are what Keats called the 'Bane of every wicked spell; silencer of the dragon's yell,' I suppose you'll arrest Ace-High Halliday tonight."

FOR a long moment Sheriff Sam didn't answer. He sat there eying his desk-propped boots as if seeing them for the first time and being hugely interested in their brush-scarred condition.

"I'm tired tonight, Doc," he said, finally. "Terribly tired. Reckon I might put it off until morning."

"A capital idea," Plunkett declared. "Do not tonight what were better done tomorrow."

When the medico departed, Odegarde morbidly considered the dark portent of Plunkett's startling news. Even though Sheriff Sam had known that the arrival of the rails would surely cause an influx of gunhung riffraff, he had felt confident that there'd be no real emergencies with the famous town-tamer Blue Blake siding him. But now, with Blake bedfast, the whole responsibility for law and order rested on the sheriff. And he was in no shape to accept it.

Odegarde was thinking about that, and remembering what had happened the night he visited Halliday's saloon at Kicking Horse Canyon, when a step sounded in the doorway where a sad-eyed Mexican stood hat in hand.

It was Pedro Carillo, dishwasher at the Oriental Cafe.

"Boss have fire me for bein' dronk on San Juan's Day," he said meekly. "Now my wife Maria she cry all the time and there is no *frijoles* for the leetle ones and they are veree hongry."

Sheriff Sam sighed. Being sheriff of Broken Bow involved more complications than most mayors had to cope with. He dug a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it to Pedro.

"I'll talk to Lee Sing tonight," he promised. "You go back to work tomorrow—and no more *tequila*."

"*Gracias*, Senor Sam!" Carillo exclaimed smilingly and crossed himself. "*Nunca tequila, nunca pulque—much trabajo!*"

"No drinking, much work," Sheriff Sam mused. "Sounds downright dull for a fact."

Whereupon Pedro Carillo blurted: "*Viva* Senor Sam!" and hastily departed.

Again Odegarde's thoughts turned to the dangerous task confronting him—the chore that might mean disgrace or death. And again the dismal run of his thinking was interrupted.

Effie Sprague, proprietor of the Bon Ton Millinery and queen bee of Broken Bow's church circle, hurried into the office.

"About time you came home, Sam Odegarde!" she announced caustically. "Terrible things have been happening here

while you've been traipsing off in the hills admiring your shadow!"

"So I've heard," Sheriff Sam said wearily.

"But have you heard that young Jimmy Red broke my front window this afternoon with a slingshot?"

The old lawman soberly shook his head. "No, Effie, that's one calamity Doc forgot to tell me about."

"Doc!" Effie Sprague scoffed. "And to think that booze-guzzling old reprobate once had the nerve to propose marriage to me!"

Then, remembering why she was here, Effie declared: "I want you to give that young ruffian a good scare—threaten to lock him up, or something. This isn't the first time he's broken a window. He's always shooting at birds with that pesky slingshot. I want you to take it away from him—tonight."

"I promise," Odegarde said, eager to be rid of her sharp-toned talk. "I'll go see him right way."

Thus it was that Sheriff Sam sauntered slowly along Main Street a few minutes later. Most of the business establishments were closed but loud talk and boisterous laughter came from the warehouse which was now Halliday's Alhambra. There were lights in Shaemus O'Shea's saloon next door, and a constant jangle of piano music flowed from Kate's Canvas Coliseum.

When he was directly opposite Halliday's saloon, Odegarde paused, giving the place a squint-eyed appraisal. There didn't seem to be much light over there. Perhaps the place was fogged by tobacco smoke, for it was obviously jampacked with customers. A dozen saddled broncs dozed at the hitchrack, and although Sheriff Sam couldn't make out their brands, he knew they belonged to cowpunchers come from the Fandango Hills to try their luck at Ace-High's gaming tables.

THE old lawman cursed, bitterly thinking how little chance those hard-working waddies would have to win. Thinking also of the night he cautioned Halliday against running a gimmicked roulette wheel at Kicking Horse Canyon Camp.

"It takes sharper eyes than yours to detect a gimmick, Odegarde," the gambler had jibed. "You stick to rustlers and let me handle the gambling gadgets."

Because Sheriff Sam felt no real responsibility for the welfare of roustabout railroad laborers, he had let Halliday get away with it. But this was different. These cow-country folks were his own people. He owed them protection. Yet what could he do, knowing that a secret flaw made a mockery of the badge he wore?

Odegarde sighed, and turning in at the Oriental Cafe, ordered a cup of black coffee from Lee Sing.

"Velly happy see you home," the smiling Chinese assured him. "Eat, dlink and be melly."

Sheriff Sam winced. "For tomorrow I may die," he added.

"All men sentenced to death day they are born," Lee Sing said philosophically. "You want T-bone steak and flied spuds, mebbe?"

Sheriff Sam shook his head. "Just java —and a little favor."

"Anything you want," Lee Sing promised, for he had worshiped Sheriff Sam since the day Odegarde had saved his precious pigtail from the scissors of a drunken cowboy.

"Then put Pedro Carillo back to work in the morning," Sheriff Sam suggested. "Pedro promises to work hard, and stay sober."

Lee Sing nodded agreement, whereupon Sheriff Sam thanked him and departed. It was ironic, he reflected, that he should be spending this time running small errands. That such trivial matters as a Mexican's job and a small boy's slingshot were absorbing his attention on what might be his last night in Broken Bow. For that's what it amounted to, if he endeavored to arrest Ace-High Halliday tomorrow. Either that, or turn in his badge.

Odegarde tried to think how it would be, without the star on his vest. And

knew bleakly that he couldn't resign. Not under fire. Not while Broken Bow needed his services as it had never needed them before. Absently he fingered the battered old badge on his vest. He'd worn it so long that the star's pattern would show against the faded fabric if he took it off. And there was another pattern, stamped deep inside him—a pattern of pride which Parable Plunkett scoffingly referred to as a "drinkless trickle in the sands of time."

Perhaps, Sheriff Sam reflected, that's what pride was. But a man couldn't lay it aside when the going got tough. He couldn't discard it like a tattered garment. Nor could he turn in his badge. These were the things Odegarde dismally considered as he turned down Tin Can Alley and cautiously made his way through this dark street of crumbling old 'dobes and flimsy frame shacks to the home of Jimmy Reed.

The boy's father, a drunkard who'd contributed little to the family's welfare, had died a year ago. His mother, faced with the necessity of feeding three children, worked as a waitress at the Mansion House Hotel.

Jimmy sat in the lamplit doorway, winding twine tightly around the handle of a well-made slingshot. He peered up at Sheriff Sam.

"So Tattletale Sprague told you about my accident," he said sullenly.

"Yeah," Odegarde said. "She suggested I arrest you, Jimmy."

The boy stood up, squaring his narrow shoulders. "I'm ready to go," he announced. "I didn't calculate to bust that winder—but I'll sure take my medicine like any man would."

Sheriff Sam kept back a smile. Jimmy, he thought, was too danged willing. Either that, or he was running a good bluff.

"Mebbeso I won't have to arrest you," he said soberly, "if you'll give me that slingshot and promise not to make another."

But that offer didn't change the tight-lipped frown on Jimmy's face, nor loosen the stiff straightness of his spindly frame.

"I'd rather be arrested," he declared. "This here is the biggest and best slingshot in Broken Bow—mebbe the best in Arizona Territory. Took me a long time to make her, and I wouldn't want to lose her, no-how. A feller has to have some sort of weapon to protect hisself agin snakes and such."

SHERIFF SAM peered at the boy, endeavoring to place an accurate reckoning on the lad's obstinacy. But the light was poor and the boy's face was little more than a blur. Odegarde took time out to blow his nose and consider what to do. Threatening to arrest a freckle-faced twelve-year-old boy was bad enough. The idea of forcibly depriving him of his most prized possession was something Sam Odegarde didn't like to consider. The poor kid took pride in his slingshot, and practically lived with it, spending most of his free hours improving his marksmanship. Its loss would be a boyish tragedy.

"Well," Sheriff Sam said with mock gruffness, "will you promise not to break any more windows?"

"I promise," Jimmy said quickly. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"All right then," Odegarde muttered and dug a quarter from his pocket. "Buy some candy for yourself and the little sisters."

"Gee, thanks, Sheriff Sam! Thanks a lot!" Jimmy exclaimed, and the appreciation in his voice was good to hear. "I'll get stick candy for the girls and lickrish for myself."

Whereupon Sheriff Sam Odegarde picked his way back to Main Street, and for a reason he couldn't quite define, felt less dismal and less disheartened.

On his way to the jail office, Sheriff Sam stopped in at the Mansion House Hotel to see Doc Plunkett. The old Medico greeted him with a jovial smile.

"I'll risk my reputation as a physician that Marshal Blake will survive!" he declared.

"That's fine," Odegarde said. "I'm sure glad to hear it."

Then he closed the door and asked:

"Any medicine that'll improve my eyesight on short notice, Doc?"

The medico shook his head.

"Your trouble is chronic, Sam. It's part of old age. I doubt if you'll ever be totally-blind, but there'll be intervals when your eyes will go out of focus and your vision will be badly blurred."

"Like now," Odegarde muttered. He made an open-palmed gesture with his hands. "What'll I do, Doc," he asked dejectedly. "If I don't arrest Halliday tomorrow folks will want to know why. If we tell 'em it's on account of my eyes, every hardcase in town will feel free to run wild. I can't quit and leave decent folks without any protection at all—not now, with Marshal Blake laid up."

"An intolerable situation," Plunkett agreed. "I might even say an abominable situation." He tapped the edge of his littered, roll-top desk and spoke thoughtfully. "If we could fashion some scheme whereby you could successfully cope with Halliday tomorrow there might be no further test of your sight for days—perhaps not until your eyes clear up again. How about just running a bluff on Halliday, Sam. You might not need to shoot at all."

"Not a chance," Odegarde muttered. "Halliday knows I'm practically blind. He found it out a week ago in Kicking Horse Canyon."

"That's unfortunate—in fact it's catastrophic," Doc said. Then a smile brightened his age-mottled face as he drew a pair of dusty, discarded spectacles from a pigeonhole of his desk. "I have it, Sam. I have it!" he exclaimed.

"What've you got, besides a pair of worthless glasses you tried out on me a year ago?" Odegarde asked disconsolately.

"A plan," Plunkett insisted. "A brash and brilliant scheme whereby we can bluff Halliday into allowing you to arrest him without the need of firing a shot!"

Then, as Sheriff Sam leaned forward intently listening, Parable Plunkett divulged his plan.

"Halliday eats breakfast every morning in the Oriental at ten o'clock sharp. Then he comes out on the stoop and suns himself for a few minutes, while smoking a cigar. Tomorrow morning at quarter past ten you step from your office, wearing these spectacles. Of course they won't help your sight at all, but Ace-High won't know that."

"But supposin' he doesn't even notice I'm wearin' 'em," Sheriff Sam asked. "Or mebbe thinks they ain't helpin' me?"

PLUNKETT thought about that for a moment. diligently rubbing his whisky-reddened nose until it shone like a scarlet banner.

"I've got it, Sam," he exclaimed. "Here's how we handle it! I'll also eat breakfast at ten, and follow Halliday out to the stoop. When you're close enough to spot us, but still quite some distance away, you call: "Good morning, Doc. These glasses surely did the trick. I can see a breadcrumb on your vest. That will convince Halliday, and he'll not want a showdown with a sheriff who can outshoot him two to one when your eyes are right!"

"By grab!" Odegarde blurted. "I think it'll work!"

He was smiling when he went downstairs, and when Jonathan Peppersal, the clerk, asked nervously: "Are you going to arrest that out-of-town gambler who refuses to abide by our curfew law?" Sheriff Sam said confidently: "I'll have Halliday in jail before noon tomorrow."

Odegarde was still smiling as he walked toward the jail and assured other inquiring townsmen that he'd settle with Ace-High within the next twenty-four hours.

"Want to do it in daylight," he told them, "so no bystanders will be hurt."

But next morning Sheriff Sam didn't feel quite so confident. Suppose something went wrong? What if Halliday changed his habit of eating at ten o'clock?

The moment Odegarde stepped to his office doorway he realized that both he and Doc Plunkett had overlooked a very important factor in this game of bluff. He would be walking eastward, *with morning's sharp sunlight in his eyes!*

That would make it almost impossible for him to see anything—even a blurred

image. Futile fingers of regret nagged at the lawman's mind. It would've been better to attempt Halliday's arrest last night, for lamplight wouldn't be as dazzling as sunlight. But it was too late now. He had promised to arrest the gambler before noon. He'd do it, or die in the attempt!

So thinking, Odegarde took out his heavy watch and held its face close to his eyes. Three minutes past ten. He picked up the glasses from his desk, and cleaned them with a bandanna. Then he tried them on, adjusting the steel frames to fit snugly behind his ears. It wouldn't do to have them drop off, in case he stubbed a toe. That was another thing he'd have to keep in mind—the uneven places in the plank walk. There was one in front of the livery stable, and another near the Wells Fargo office. He wouldn't want to stumble while Halliday was watching him.

Presently he strapped on his gun gear and examined the loads in his old Peacemaker model Colt. He smiled mirthlessly, thinking how little difference it made whether his gun was loaded or empty.

"If Halliday calls my bluff I'm a gone goose," he reflected, and peered at his watch again.

Promptly at ten fifteen Sheriff Sam Odegarde stepped from his office doorway and began walking toward the Oriental Cafe. At this same moment Jimmy Reed came out of the Mercantile, carrying a sack of candy and chewing on a black strip of licorice. But the old lawman didn't notice him. As if Providence had abruptly decided to take a hand in this desperate game, a fleecy cloud drifted above the eastern hills, obstructing the sun's bright light. Odegarde couldn't see the cloud, but he felt the diminishing warmth against his face and the lessening glare in his eyes. He smiled, and exchanged greetings with Dude Mulqueen who sat at the doorway of his livery.

PEERING ahead, Sheriff Sam could vaguely see the remote shapes of two men on the Oriental stoop. Good old Doc, he thought, standing there with Halliday just like he'd promised. Maybe the deal was going to be as simple as it had seemed last night. Perhaps he was just a spooky old coot, fearing something would go wrong. He took another few steps, guarding against any semblance of eagerness which might give him away.

"Good mornin', Doc," he called out. "These glasses sure did the trick."

He waited for Plunkett to answer him, but when the silence was finally broken, it was Ace-High Halliday's voice he heard.

"What trick you talking about, lawdog?"

"Why, improving my eyesight," Odegarde declared. "I can even see a breadcrumb on Doc's vest."

Halliday laughed, loud and long.

"Maybe you're seeing breadcrumbs, Odegarde, but not on Doc's vest. This ain't Plunkett standing beside me. It's Tex Taplin, my roulette man."

For a fleeting instant, while the significance of the gambler's words rifled through Sheriff Sam, he continued to walk forward. Then abruptly he halted.

There were only two blurred shapes on the cafe stoop. If one of them was Tex Taplin, then Doc Plunkett wasn't there. Which meant that *Halliday knew the glasses hadn't improved his sight at all!*

Odegarde shivered, yet perspiration dripped from his armpits. Ace-High knew he couldn't see well enough to shoot accurately. The gambler had this deal tabbed for exactly what it was—blind man's bluff. And the bluff was busted.

Where, Sheriff Sam wondered wildly, was Doc Plunkett? Why hadn't the old medico kept his part of the plan?

All this in the suspended fragment of time while Ace-High Halliday's amused laughter ran its course. While young Jimmy Reed gazed worshipfully at Odegarde and called: "Howdy, Sheriff Sam."

The boy's greeting brought a cynical smile to Odegarde's lips. If a man ever needed friends the sheriff needed them now. But his friends weren't gunslick fighters. They were peaceable, kindly folks like Doc Plunkett and Jonathan Peppersal and Lee Sing. Unfortunate folks like Pedro Carillo and young Jimmy

Reed. Sheriff Sam shrugged off a slogging sense of futility.

"Hello, Jimmy," he replied, and continued his march toward the Oriental.

"I heard a crazy rumor about you intending to arrest me this morning," Ace-High Halliday called tauntingly.

"That's right," Odegarde declared, and tried desperately to force some semblance of clarity to his blurred vision. If only he could get close enough to tell when Halliday grabbed for his gun.

"You wouldn't be wantin' to try it now, would you?" Tex Taplin asked sneeringly.

Odegarde ignored the roulette man. Halliday was the one he must concentrate on. Even though Taplin would probably back his boss to the limit, Halliday was the target he had to hit before bullets blasted him down. There was no thought of survival in Sheriff Sam now. No hope, beyond that of doing the thing he somehow had to accomplish before he died.

Eagerly, as a man hurying to keep an important appointment, the old lawman tramped toward the cafe stoop.

He was close enough now so that he could distinguish between Halliday's tall form and the block shape of Taplin.

"That's close enough," Halliday warned. "Stop right there, or grab iron!"

"You're under arrest," Sheriff Sam announced, and was mildly surprised at the note of authority that came with those three familiar words.

HABIT, he realized then, was a strong thing in a man. Too strong to resist. And Ace-High Halliday had the habit of playing cinches—which was what he was doing now.

Sheriff Sam glimpsed the gambler's right hand darting to holster, and his own followed suit. He drew and peered desperately at that indistinct shape. Suddenly he heard Effie Sprague scream.

"Help Sheriff Sam! Somebody help him!"

The wicked snarl of a slug made Odegarde dodge instinctively at the exact moment he pulled trigger. That, he thought despairingly, was a wasted shot. It wouldn't even come close to that half-seen target ahead of him. When he looked through the backlash of smoke from his gun, he caught a blurred vision of Taplin down on hands and knees.

And in the same suspended instant Odegarde's probing eyes vaguely registered a dancing, distorted shape collapsing where Halliday stood a moment ago. That didn't make sense to Sheriff Sam. He lifted his left hand, rubbing his eyes.

"Per'aps I haveeng keeled Tex Taplin weeth a broom handle, no?" he heard Pedro Carillo exclaim cheerfully.

All at once then the street seemed to be filled with people.

"Pedro got one and Sheriff Sam got the other!" a man shouted excitedly.

But Odegarde could scarcely believe it was true. It was astonishing enough that Pedro had knocked Taplin down from behind with a broom handle—but how could he possibly have targeted Halliday by one half-aimed, dodgingly fired shot?

Doc Plunkett came running up to him. "Marshal Blake reached a crisis, Sam," he exclaimed pantingly. "I couldn't leave him. Let's go see where you drilled Halliday. It seems to have been accurate and satisfyingly fatal."

But a moment later, as Doc Plunkett finished examining the fallen gambler, his eyes were filled with astonishment.

"I can't find a bullet hole, Sam. Nothing except a bruise on his forehead."

Which was when Jimmy Reed sidled up to Odegarde. "I hit him with my slingshot. And it weren't no accident."

Sheriff Sam knelt down and handcuffed Halliday with practised skill. Then he stood up and blinkingly gazed at a freckle-faced boy who held a sturdy slingshot in his hand—and at a smiling old Mexican dishwasher who got drunk on San Juan's Day. These were his friends, the ones he'd helped last evening, never guessing they could possibly help him. But between them they'd saved his life.

Sheriff Sam loosed a gusty sigh.

"No man ever had finer friends, nor needed 'em worse, by grab!" he declared happily.

Bandits on both sides of the Rio laughed at the Border Patrol till it was joined by a one-man army, Ranger Joe Sitters

SCOURGE of the SMUGGLERS

A True Story by HAROLD PREECE

THE smugglers' trail was already dim and cold that torrid summer morning of 1912. One Ranger sighed disgustedly when Ramon, the Tigua scout, turned and said:

"No signs. No find 'em El Chico Cano. He cross back into Mexico, me think." The feather in the Indian's sombrero drooped with disappointment.

The rawboned recruit in the rear

spurred forward. He touched three fingers respectfully to his hat as he addressed his commander.

"Don't wanta horn in too much, Cap'n Hughes, with me not twenty-four hours a Ranger. But what about this?"

He reached toward the branches of a low-hanging tree and snapped off a clump of Spanish moss. Twined around the moss were three wisps of horsehair.

"Came from a sorrel," he said, "the kind Old Chico rides. Reckon his hoss rubbed up against the tree and left us one mark to follow—even if the hoofs was wrapped in gunny sacks to leave no ground prints."

His keen eye fixed on an algerita bush, a few yards from the trail. Quickly, he dismounted and fumbled around the prickly, holly-like leaves. The bush yielded two more strands left by a passing horse. Then the rookie Ranger bent down, scanning the ground like a bloodhound nosing out a trail.

When he stood up, he held a tiny sack raveling in his palm. "There's no foolproof way of covering up hoofprints," he said drily. "And Chico's gang swung off the main trail here, sure as my name's Joe Sitters."

Captain Hughes looked admiringly at Private Sitters. "You know Chico's signs better than anybody in Company D, Joe," he said. "You trailed him enough years as a deputy sheriff right here in this county. All right, you and Ramon ride ahead as scouts and we'll be just behind."

Brush Battle

The trail of the smugglers became hotter as the Rangers steered their mounts through the jungle of bush and cactus. Joe Sitters saw more tell-tale ravelings. An empty cartridge shell showed that a man had stopped to take a shot at some wild thing. Sitters reined up his horse and whistled softly when he jumped off to pick up a woman's vanity case that had dropped from the smugglers' contraband.

He opened the case to find a small circular of an El Paso broker who specialized in buying up bankrupt wholesale stocks. "Their source of supply," he thought. "Now we know where they get the stuff to peddle in Mexico after slipping it across the Rio Grande without paying customs duties."

Two miles from the trail, Sitters saw thin whiffs of smoke arising from a thicket.

"They pulled up to rest their horses and light cigarettes," he drawled in a low tone to Captain Hughes. "Reckon we ought to fan out and surround 'em."

The Texans moved to encircle the outlaws. But a Ranger horse stepped heavily on some dead brush. A smuggler's ear heard the sound. Excited voices sounded from the thicket, then a blast of shot.

Ramon the Tigua slumped from his saddle and fell to the ground. Hoofs pounding, guns thundering, the Texans charged through the wilderness and found themselves face to face with the smugglers mounted on horses sporting gaudy Mexican saddles.

Sitters recognized the burly bandit chief, Chico Cano, and his evil brothers, Jose and Manuel. He'd known them from the time they started out as ordinary border steer snatchers up to this day when they'd graduated into smuggling. He knew also the heavily-armed men who rode with them because he never forgot a name nor a crime.

Two of the outlaws dropped dead from the Ranger volleys. The rest spurred their horses in a mad rout with the Texans on their flanks.

"Our meetings are frequent, Senor Sitter!" the bandit shouted to his old enemy. "You interfere with my business, Senor!"

Chico Cano's gun clipped the ribbon from Sitters' Stetson and barely missed plowing through the Ranger's brain. Sitters' Colt answered with a slug in Chico's right arm, and the outlaw cursed in pain.

By this time the smugglers were scattering to divide and confuse their pursuers. "We'll have many more battles with them!" Sitters shouted to Captain Hughes. "Best thing now is to round up their pack mules that scattered when the shootin' started."

Hughes nodded. The Rangers found the frightened, laden mules milling around the body of Ramon.

"Reckon they wanted a man's protection, even if it was a dead man," Sitters commented ruefully. "Poor old Ramon." He took off his hat. The rest of the company doffed theirs for a moment of silent tribute to a red-skinned Texan who'd never borne Ranger rank, but would be buried with Ranger honors.

Gallant Performance

Ten thousand dollars in rich merchandise was later turned over to U. S. border customs inspectors. And Joe Sitters had earned a citation for gallant performance before his first twenty-four hours of wearing the Ranger badge.

"In my twenty-five years of service, I've never seen finer scouting than yours, Joe," Captain Hughes told him. "You could track a jackrabbit through a rock quarry."

"Thanks, Cap'n," replied Sitters. But he was too busy planning his next move against Chico Cano's smuggler gang to fish for compliments.

On a lazy Texas morning, he strode into the office of the El Paso broker whose advertising he'd found in the dropped vanity.

The pudgy merchant gave him a bland smile. "My old friend, Deputy Sitters," he said jovially. "Take a chair, Joe, and a cigar."

The rawboned one remained standing. "Not Deputy Sitters, Fleming," he rasped. "*Ranger* Sitters of Company D. Reckon you forgot to take your identification out of this little piece you sold Chico Cano."

The broker's eyes bulged when Sitters threw the opened vanity with the circular on his desk.

"I—I'm a business man," he blustered. "I sell to anybody who's got cash to buy."

Sitters' hand shot out and grabbed his collar. "Bad business, you rat!" he said. "You know the penalty for anybody who knowingly sells to smugglers!"

He reached his other hand into his pocket and pulled out a warrant, then a pair of manacles. He marched his prisoner to the customs house and turned him over to a U. S. deputy marshal. The merchant drew five years in Federal prison for aiding and abetting runners of contraband.

That was the beginning of Ranger Joe Sitters' spectacular career as the foe of smugglers. Within a few weeks of his enlistment, the big booty rings operating across the Rio Grande trembled at mention of his name. Within a few weeks, Captain Hughes rated him as one of the best men who'd ridden in Company D.

Chico Cano and others like him had thumbed noses at the customs patrolmen on Uncle Sam's payroll. This time, they were coping with a man who knew the turbulent border country even better than the outlaws who'd used its brakes and canyons as hideouts for more generations than any Texan could remember.

It was Ranger Sitters who guided the customs men on one swift raid after another. It was he, the great Texas scout, who taught them how to pick up a trail that seemed lost.

He taught the patrol new techniques of capture, and they were Texans who learned fast. The Federal jail in El Paso was jammed with smugglers awaiting trial. Then he saw his work almost wrecked by the mysteries of red tape in Washington.

A Treasury official, who'd never seen a smuggler in the flesh, decreed that all customs inspectors must pass rigid civil service examinations. Brave men, whose education had been in the saddle and not in the schools, found themselves fired and replaced by a horde of big city tenderfoots who could read books but not outlaw trails.

Joe Is Drafted

"Dude inspectors," Joe Sitters and every other border man called them. But smugglers and rustlers rejoiced that veteran man hunters no longer "interfered with business."

They swarmed from across the Rio

Grande into Texas. Chico Cano resumed operations by stealing cattle and then shipping them from Mexico to Cuba and Central America. The dudes made grandiloquent statements and posed for pictures in the newspapers. But not in a decade had the border known such an epoch of loot and lawlessness.

Texas ranchmen sent scorching complaints to Washington. Washington brusquely referred all complaints back to the new chief of the border patrol—also a tenderfoot—in El Paso. Caught in the middle, that official hotfooted it to Ranger headquarters in Ysleta, a few miles away.

"I'm robbing you of a man," he said with forced humor. He pointed to Ranger Sitters. "That man."

"We'll leave it up to him," Captain Hughes snapped. "Joe, do you want to leave the Rangers and be a customs inspector? Pay's more than double the measly salary you boys get."

Sitters' face flushed. "Pay's not the thing, Cap'n. But I've got to see through a job that I started. I've got to see that these *contrabandistas* get what's coming."

Sorrowfully, John Hughes wrote out his friend's discharge. An illustrious captain and an illustrious scout shook hands. The patrol chief found some way to exempt Joe Sitters from the unrealistic civil service requirements. Sitters' first assignment as a customs inspector was to round up a gang of cattle smugglers which had laughingly defeated a patrol of dudes.

The trail was three weeks cold when the ex-Ranger took it up. The last apparent traces had been wiped out by the high border winds that February of 1912. Sitters' tenderfoot command grumbled at what seemed useless work.

He paid them no mind. His shrewd eye, bent to the trail, found a nail from a loose horseshoe. Broken twigs, here and there, pieced out the story. Sitters led his men through winding mountain passes and on to a broad, rolling range.

They found the stolen steers grazing peacefully. But the outlaws had evidently thought it unhealthy to stay and greet visitors.

In the months that followed, Sitters drilled the tenderfoots into hard, disciplined border fighters. And the big contraband rings began crumbling.

Sometimes he pooled his outfit with his old Ranger company to make lightning attacks on secret hideouts of outlaws. Sometimes he operated only with his own command, sometimes solely by himself. Whatever his strategy, he once more filled up the empty cells of El Paso's federal jails. Powder burnt his cheeks and bullets scarred his flesh. But he rode on, a scourge of vengeance against evildoers.

He was offered a captaincy to return to the Rangers, for John Hughes would be settling down to well-earned retirement in a few years. Joe Sitters regretfully declined.

He'd smashed all the gangs except Chico Cano's. He harried and flayed Chico's outlaw squads till the smuggler chieftain retreated to the isolated mountain village of El Porvenir, connected with the rest of Texas only by a winding closely-guarded trail.

Back From the Dead

On the morning of January 23, 1913, Sitters was scouting the rugged Davis Mountains with Customs Inspector Joe Howard and Cattle Inspector J. A. Harvick. They were riding along quietly when they flushed six men who dashed away on their ponies from a chaparral patch.

"Surrender!" Sitters shouted. An evil face turned toward them, a shot rang out. The ex-Ranger recognized his old enemy, Chico Cano.

The officers dug their spurs into the flanks of their mounts. Pursuers and pursued matched fire. An outlaw tumbled from his saddle. A Texas bullet hit Chico Cano's mount. The bandit lit on the ground, firing at the lawmen as his companions dodged into the brush.

Sitters' Colt barked. Chico's gun sailed, useless, into a ravine. Then the outlaw was looking into a face that he hated.

"All right, Chico," Sitters growled. "Up

with your hands. You'll get a fair trial."

The bandit's hands soared. "Some day, Senor Sitters," he said pleasantly, "I shall have your scalp."

The outlaw's hands came down for cuffs. "Check your irons, boys," Sitters directed. "We got him. But we're gonna have trouble getting him out of here."

That minute, a bullet whined from the brush. The Rangers ducked from a roaring fusillade as Chico's men rained shot on them from the brush.

Joe Howard fell, a bullet through his heart. As the other two lawmen rushed to him, Chico Cano dashed up a trail like a mountain goat. Sitters and Harvick sent a blast after him. The smuggler king dropped behind a big rock as his men crept forward to join him and shoot at the two men below.

Harvick dropped with a bullet in his leg. Sitters reeled as a shot whizzed-grazed his skull. The firing stopped as the outlaws made their get-away.

Harvick painfully crawled toward his silent comrades. "Two of us dead," he muttered. "Have to get out of here and notify the sheriff.

The cattle inspector whistled to his horse, clutched the stirrup and painfully began trying to climb hand over hand, to the pony's back. He whirled around, gun drawn when he heard a rustle.

He saw Joe Sitters sitting up dazedly where he'd fallen. "Just—just a crease, Harve," Sitters said. Five minutes later, he was helping his wounded friend into the saddle and loading the corpse of the fallen Howard into another.

The Last Trail

Chico Cano shook with fear when he heard that Joe Sitters had risen up to hound him again. He abandoned El Porvenir, and retreated across the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

From there, he sent insulting messages to Sitters. The tall Texan laughed them off. But his one-time Ranger mates wished that he would take them more seriously.

For three years more, a gallant fighter continued to add to his laurels. World War I had started in Europe; the time was nearing when Joe Sitters' own country would be plunged into it. Realizing that, he turned his attention to German spies operating back and forth across the Rio Grande. He planted loyal Texans of German descent in their circles. The information that he secured helped the U. S. Secret Service to close in on the Kaiser's operatives and jail many of them.

On the night of May 24, 1916, Sitters was camped in forbidding Pilares Canyon with young Ranger Eugene Hulen and three Texas ranchmen seeking a band of Chico's lobos currently engaged in smuggling stolen horses across the Rio Grande. During the night, the pursuers heard colts nickering. But it was unwise to take the trail in the pitch dark.

They struck it early the next morning. Sitters and Gene Hulen rode a considerable distance ahead of the others.

They rounded a bend in the canyon. Shots began spewing around them from either wall of the canyon. Ranger Hulen groaned once and was dead. Sitters jumped from his horse and began shooting from a kneeling position.

Then six bullets hit him in the back and he crumpled forward. He was still breathing when Chico and his gang ran like tigers toward their kill. They ringed him and began firing again.

When the three rear men galloped up, the bandits were gone. But the mutilated body of a brave Texan fighter lay in a pool of blood.

Two more brave men had died to sustain a great tradition—the fighting tradition of the Texas Rangers. But Chico Cano's rejoicing was only for a little while.

Texas National Guardsmen assigned to the border riddled him with bullets not long after. Texas Rangers wound up the job by storming the outlaw village and wiping out the gang for all time.

And for all time, the memory of Joe Sitters will live as a supreme scout, a fearless frontiersman, and a red-blooded Ranger.

Joey Strait had to face death before he found out which was the right side of the law!

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A Man of Importance

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

HE PUT out the fire carefully, with the first breaking of the sun over the mountain. Even though he was on the west slope, and the express station's three-hundred-and-sixty acre flat was on the east slope, he wasn't taking chances. They mustn't know he was here. Not yet.

When he was sure there was no possibility of a tell-tale column of smoke to warn the station agent and his helper that a furtive stranger lurked near-

by, he squatted back on his haunches and sipped the still fiery dregs of his morning coffee.

He remembered, suddenly, the snuffling sounds that had come from the underbrush near where Blaze, his mustang, was picketed, back there in the trackless hours of the night. He set the pan down and investigated.

Blaze was still nervous, cocking his ears forward and stamping restlessly in the small clearing. His owner slipped the halter loose and patted the horse's muzzle and neck gently, then led him down the grade to the stream.

The horse neighed, once, and skittered aside, and the man knew the beast feared something. He felt his six-gun appraisingly, then went ahead with more caution, his eyes on the ground, If it was a snake, he couldn't risk a shot that would warn the express agent that someone was near. Someone who didn't want the agent to know. Not just yet a while.

He let his plan for meeting a rattler run ahead in his mind. A boulder. Then suddenly he stopped, his eyes widening on the flattened spikegrass and underbrush where some heavy body had crouched in long vigil. As if to confirm what the man suspected, the horse whinnied its fright and tried to break away, climbing high on its hind legs.

The man fought the horse quiet again, then crouched low and sniffed. He didn't know if it was imagination, or if he really smelled something—something offensively pungent. Then he went still as a statue, his eyes on the huge padmark in a sand fault.

"Mountain lion!" he knew then.

He knew then, too, that the snuffling noise of the previous night had not been his horse, but the mountain cat sobbing with impatience because the horse was so near. But the man-smell was too near, also.

In an angry monotone, he cursed.

He cursed Roane Slade, the lean, hawk-nosed leader who had planned this whole thing, from selecting the express to be robbed to just how it was to be completed, with Slade and his toughies to be waiting close to Buckland's, their presence at that farther express station and settlement to be an iron-clad alibi when the robbed stage driver sent out the alarm. If he lived to send out the alarm.

He cursed the fate that cast him, Joey Strait, in the rôle of the youngest and the least of Slade's odd-assorted band of road agents. He cursed the marauding Blackfeet who had wiped out the little ranch established in the Ruby Valley by his pilgrim parents, those haze-memoried years ago.

He cursed the instinct to live that had spurred him, "Little Joey" Strait, to fight his way over the mountains and through the thirst-crazing desert until Roane Slade found him, unconscious, and carried him on his saddle back to his ill-started, ill-worked diggings in Utah Territory's western St. Mary's County.

He cursed the gang that the embittered gold-loving Slade had gathered about him when the man had finally despaired of ever amassing wealth save by seizing it from others. Then he had started on a reign of terror in the country east of where Virginia City was now fighting to throw its roots into a paying lode.

It was Slade and Little Joey Strait—Little Joey who was cook, choreboy and watchful sentinel when Slade would be away on those mysterious rides. And Little Joey, the whipping boy for Slade's black rages when something unspoken would go wrong and he would return without gold or loot.

Then "Deacon" Tammis returned with Slade one day. Another time it was "Gentleman Jack" Bright. Then "Black Sammy", "Irish Mike", "Swede" Olson.

Tammis was a man who could study a faint line of dust on the horizon and predict size, course and probable booty of the party that was routed for the Coast, but slated for an earlier terminus at Doom.

GENTLEMAN Jack Bright could be soft-voiced apologetic while he shot a reluctant pilgrim or a hard-

headed miner free of his wealth and health.

Black Sammy had been a blacksmith, and was a genius at studying a brand mark on a horse, mule or steer and contriving a new iron that, when placed over the old, would evolve something that even the sharpest eye couldn't find quarrel with.

Irish Mike had a gift for breaking a wild cayuse so fast that its erstwhile owner would buy it as a saddle-broken, trailwise mount even while he thought his own wild horses were still safely roaming their canyons.

Irish Mike and Swede Olson knew the Indian ways and the dialects and the signs and the languages. They could trade the sharpest feathered chief out of his war-trail loot with the same easy facility with which Joey Strait concocted a savory stew or forked a wild horse, or gun-slugged a rattlesnake at fifty paces.

But being camp cook, or riding newly broken horses to a near settlement to sell, these were not Strait's ideas of a man's work.

And so it was he continually complained to Slade, asked time and again for work more befitting a youngster like himself who was ready for the sterner things in life.

Big, dark, dour Slade would chuckle, his eyes speculating on the wiry youth he had saved from a desert death.

"Go on, son, and stop botherin' me!" he would say. "What can you do for us? Cook and ride. Well, you're doin' that now. Stick to your work and stop botherin' me."

But Joey brought it up again and again, hearing the men boast of their feats on the road, of their tricks with the guns or with the Indians or with the brands. It irked him that, of them all, he alone didn't count, was of no importance.

Gentleman Jack, listening to the never-old argument between the two, said one day, "Take my advice, Slade, and give the kid more of a share in things. If you don't, he'll be cutting loose to go on his own."

"So?" Slade had asked. "And if he goes? Ain't nothin' he does that a one-eyed Chinee couldn't do as good."

Gentleman Jack drew thoughtfully on the thin cigar he favored.

"Yes, there is, Slade," he said gently. "There is somethin' he can do. Uh—mebbe he could tell a sheriff or three a few things that would interest 'em. Better pay some heed, Slade, or mebbe some day you'll regret it."

Slade's eyes had narrowed at the implication in Gentleman Jack's words, and he had growled threats of murder and mayhem, should anything like treason to the Slade band transpire.

But he had been thoughtful about it, for a time, and when again Joey made his complaint of being left out of things, of being a chore-boy when he might be matching the others in their deeds of derring-do, Roane Slade had grunted, "I got a idea, Joey boy. But only a idea. I reckon you know the Smith's Creek country a bit?"

Joey's heart had leaped. "I sure do!"

"Reckon you know the Express-station there?"

"I sure do! I run hosses to 'em for the Pony Express relays, plenty times. Them California mustangs we st—we get."

"So you did, Joey, so you did. Now, the stage comes past Smith's Creek twice a week, as you know, too. We—ll, there's a bit of business we got in mind relatin' to the stage, and when the time comes, you'll be in on it, son."

For ten days and more, Joey had moved with a new zest in his daily tasks, listened to the talk of his elders with new interest.

That the intended work of Slade's would involve something outside the pale of the law, Joey didn't even pause to consider. In the primitive West that Joey Strait knew, the law was so sketchy, so often administered by individuals who were actually more lawless than otherwise, that what was possible was, by and large, legal. If you could do it, if you could bring it to pass, that was that.

ALLEGEDLY honest traders dressed their skins and doctored their scales and otherwise made their goods look like what they were not. The traders' customers freely sprinkled their gold dust with baser metals than gold, or measured it out with a false-bottomed thimble which should have, but rarely did, contain the four-dollar measure it was assayed to hold.

Land was always sold by pictures that charmed, rather than portrayed. Express and freight haulers made any promise necessary to get a contract, with no more notion of making good on their promises than the shippers had of accepting delivery without instantly presenting a bill for damages en route.

Beeves were encouraged to eat liberally of salt, and led to copious supplies of water, just prior to the visit of the buyer, so that they would be fat and sleek beyond the truth of it.

These were the arts and the wiles that the white men practised on one another. Many more, in addition, when they were doing business with Lo, the Noble Indian. In Indian trade, anything went.

And there were sharp practises in filing claims for land, in staking out mining claims, in anything and everything that pioneer men turned their hands to in the fight for commercial, as well as physical, survival in the early West.

Survival came first, with men of Roane Slade's stamp, and Joey Strait had all but padded out of his formative years without knowing there could be any higher aim in life than simple survival.

Duty, to Joey Strait, was cooking three meals a day, breaking horses to the trail, and shooting rattlers, antlered bucks, prowling bears and warring Indians.

The inner dissatisfaction that stirred him to restlessness was attributed by him to a natural desire to do things, to grow, to progress, to become more important in the affairs of men. His envy of the parts played in his limited world of men by Slade, by Deacon Tammis, by Gentleman Jack and Black Sammy and Irish Mike and the Swede was as natural as it was for cactus to reach for the sun.

And with Roane Slade's grudging promise to give him a part in their doings, Joey's heart leaped. He visioned himself as finally coming into his own, in his small part of the World of the West.

But his spirits fell when, later, Slade unfolded the way it was to be.

Squatted on his lean haunches near the campfire, ringed in by the heavier shapes of the others, Joey watched the flames play over the rocky face of the outlaw leader and listened to Slade's slow, clear exposition of the impending "business" with the stage.

"Smith's Creek has a lot of busy diggin's," Slade had said, "and they're shippin' plenty dust by the stage. Trouble is, they're gettin' right cute about shippin' it. Like as not, four out of five stages'll carry no gold in the boot, and the fifth'll be chock full of it. The point is to know which is the right stage, and to handle the thing so we'll not be suspected. We can do that only by havin' the Smith's Creek station watched, and by bein' here by Buckland's when actually we are there by Smith's Creek."

Gentleman Jack smiled appreciatively, his teeth glistening in the firelight.

"So! We shall employ legerdemain?"

"Oi'm agin' bringin' anywan ilse into the thing," Irish Mike growled. "We've to shplit it many ways as 'tis."

"Legerdemain isn't a man—it's a trick, Mike," Slade said. "Sleight of hand. Like a magician, or a card-trick artist, Mike. We rig a game so they think we're here at Buckland's but we are there at Smith's Creek. Or near it, waitin' for the right stage."

"Faith an' Oi'm for it." Mike grinned widely. "An' perhaps we can use a bit more of leger-de-whoozit should we land in jail an' whist we wuz here instead of there. Say on, Slade!"

"Knowing the right stage is simple," the leader said. "We will post Joey near Smith's Creek to watch the gold

being brought in. And out! Since the stage travels by day, that will be simple. The packing of the gold onto the stage will need men to heft the weight of it. Further, Joey will watch the incoming stages from cover, will see what cases it carries, what trunks, as through express. He can tell when anything else heavy is loaded on. When he sees the gold go aboard, he rides lickety-split into the station with an Indian alarm. The coach holds over until the agent is shore things are clear. Of Injuns. Then Joe gets word to us, and we show that we are here at Buckland's, while actually we are meetin' the stage outside Smith's Creek."

Slade's listeners were silent a moment, their minds trying to grapple with the thing, to detect the workings of the plan that was slowly unfolding.

"Ponies!" Gentleman Jack finally said, with a chuckle.

SLADE stared a moment, then grunted. "Right. California mustangs, set out in relays. The way the Pony Express does it. We space the ponies out, each set under guard of a man, and when we get word from Joey that the stage is loaded and bein' held for the Injun raid, we show at Buckland's, drunker'n coots, those of us as ain't with the ponies at the relays."

"Sure, an' it sounds bether iv'ry minnit," Irish Mike crowed. "Drunk is a part Oi can play to perfection! All Oi need is a couple of bottles of Panther Juice."

"Seemin'ly drunk," Slade corrected. "Just seemin'ly. We play the part till late at night, then ride out lookin' just about able to set our hosses. Once out of sight, we ride fast! And we keep ridin' fast till we reach the stage, do our work, and pour back to camp agin, where we sure will get drunk. We'll be that way when folks come snoopin' around. Who is there to say we wasn't rollin' drunk the whole time, and right there in our camp?"

" 'Tis a noble plan," Irish Mike pronounced.

"Shut up, Mike," Gentleman Jack said gently, then asked Slade, "But what happens to the ponies? They're spraddled out all over the country between here and Smith's Creek?"

"No—" Slade shook his head—"they're not. On the return go, the spent ponies are ridden in by whoever was guardin' 'em. If they're seen, what of it? Ain't a crime for a man to lead a string of ponies. Not if they're his own, and these'll be our own. This once."

Gentleman Jack thought about it, the fire playing over his face.

"What about our young friend?" he inquired. "Joey Strait? He'll be recognized, mebbe, as the lad who gave the alarm at Smith's Creek. A false alarm. He'll be seen here, later. How about that?"

Slade had a ready answer. "Nobody knows him there. We can—uh—fix it so's nobody'll see him here. For a time."

Gentleman Jack looked at Slade intently.

"How long a time, Slade?" he asked then. "How long a time?"

"That'll work out," Slade evaded. "Now, Joey can hide on the west slope of hills, by night, so's them at Smith's Creek won't see no tell-tale of light when he cooks his grub, nor no smoke by daytime. He's not to fire his gun on no account, for if he does, the secret spyin' will be spoiled. Reckon he better not have a gun with him."

"Oh, yes, he'd better have," Gentleman Jack put in. "You know, he stands a good chance of seein' Injuns, 'tween here and there. You wouldn't want him killed?"

"Of course not!" Slade snapped.

"Not for a while yet, anyway," Gentleman Jack pursued. He ignored Slade's venomous glare. "You like the idea, Joey?"

"I sure do!" Joey enthused. "Gee, yes! Why, I may even get into some shootin'!"

"Out of the mouths of babes comes truth," Gentleman Jack sighed. "We-ll, let's hear the rest of it, Slade."

"Buckland's to Smith's Creek is a hundred and twenty miles," Slade said, giving the details. "From our

camp to where we'll meet the stage is mebbe a hunderd miles. We figger to ride our original hosses to the first relay, thirty miles away. We change and ride another forty mile, and change agin for the last thirty. We rest and water the hosses, meet the stage, and split the gold to make the carryin' easier, and start back agin, usin' relays the same way we come. Joey, who has rode back to tell us the stage is held over on account of the fake Injun raid, will wait here at camp for us."

Joey, listening, fell into a glum silence. It was just some more of the same old business, with him playing the smallest part. While the fun and the excitement and the hard work was going on, he would be waiting back here at camp.

Then, to make it worse, from what Slade had said Joey would be packed off to hide in the hills until all danger of his being recognized and identified with the stage holdup was past.

At least, that was what Joey had gathered, from the exchange between Gentleman Jack Bright and Roane Slade.

He puzzled over the sharp, almost unnoticed clash of the two older men over this phase of the plan, but forgot it presently under his compelling dissatisfaction with the same old rôle he was playing in this new and thrilling set-up.

Then his mind came back to the subject as Slade outlined final plans.

"Swede can guard the first relay," Slade said, "and Black Sammy the second one. Now, the Pony Express riders cover some stretches at a rate of twenty miles in an hour. Maybe with hard ridin', we can cover the distance in as good. It's sure we can make it there and back in eleven-twelve hours. And there won't be a soul in creation but won't swear we was too drunk the night afore to ride twenty-mile, let alone a hundred."

IN THE second week of his lonely vigil at Smith's Creek, now, Joey Strait wasn't so keen about his part in Slade's scheme of things. Three stages had come and gone, each way, and of these Joey had been most interested in the westbounds. But he had observed the others with more than casual interest, for his hermitlike existence at Roane Slade's had brought him scant contact with other than members of the band.

He had speculated on the distance-small figures that had got down out of the heavy spring-body. Eastern capitalists making a personal survey of Western possibilities; Army officers traveling from one post to another; drummers for heavy machinery manufacturers; men with broken lives carrying the shattered remnants of one existence westward to patch the scraps into a new life; adventurers; newspaper writers and novelists; sent-for relatives of men who had made good—wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, sweethearts, their crinoline and calico incongruously out of place in this wild setting.

He watched the almost daily parade of miners wending their way down out of the hills, leading their gold and silver-laden burros to place the precious metal hopefully in the hands of Ben Holladay's farflung stage lines.

He watched the stages load up in the early morning, the gun guard mount to his place beside the driver, the small station crew wave a doubtful bon voyage to these intrepid travelers.

He tried to grin when he thought of what a rude shock one such stage load would have when Roane Slade and his masked men would wave it to a gun-threat stop in some lonely cut, some secret canyon. He was half angry with himself when he couldn't get the grin to his lips.

"Gettin' soft?" he railed at himself. "A tough man out to get his stake, huh? What am I—a chore-boy, or a man!"

But his lone nights under the stars, his lone vigils over the station, his new-won seat in the hills where he watched the tide of empire flow in its never-dull stream, his speculation on the miners who faced the dangers of the wild to win some security out of the rocky ground, all this had their

effect on Joey Strait. But he didn't recognize it as such, and told himself it was his dissatisfaction with his part in the Smith's Creek plan.

He maintained his daily watches, cooked his beans and bacon and coffee over his lonely fire, ate hardtack during the day, and huddled in a shallow cave from the awesome summer storms that drenched the hillside with military regularity. And he thought about the people he was watching, about where they had come from, where they were going to, their lives and their plans.

NOW, cursing the trace of the mountain lion that was stalking Blaze, and Slade for not having foreseen that a cat might make a try for the tempting horseflesh, it suddenly occurred to Joey that he held the same sort of menace for the station agent and the dusty travelers and the hard-faced drivers and gun guards that the mountain cat held for him. A furtive, stalking thing that lived and worked in stealth, waiting only for the unguarded, right moment to pounce for the kill.

"Anyways, I don't smell like no cat," he told himself, as he thought about his rôle in the trapping of the stage. Then, recalling how long he had been out from camp, faithfully he had maintained his watch by day and stayed close to the hillside cave by night, he blinked. "But, by Joe, maybe I do!"

He hitched Blaze to a cottonwood while he stripped and plunged into the cool, cleansing waters of the stream, then dried in the sun and dressed.

He swung up onto Blaze to make his way around to where he could hitch the mount in a glade and renew his watch.

He was nearly to his place of concealment when he saw them.

Indians!

From their head-dresses and paint, he made them out to be Modocs on a raid from up toward Idaho country. They were a band of some ten or more, he saw in the first surprised, swift glance.

THEY were poised on their ponies in the screening trees, their intent gazes trained on the station settlement below. They wore full warpaint and were armed with guns in addition to their tomahawks, and they had fresh-lifted hair at their waists.

Joey tried to back Blaze carefully out of sight, so he could cut for it. But one of the Indian ponies twisted its head and neighed shrilly, then the Indians were shifting, were turning in alarm. Joey made up his mind in a breath of time.

He kicked his heels savagely against Blaze's flanks, went for his gun, and ducked low. Charging with a whoop and a yell, his six-gun was slamming in the still air.

One brave slid out of his saddle with a hideous scream. Somewhere in front, another pony went down. The Indians, evidently fearing an attack in force, broke for cover, and Joey was through, weaving a reckless path down the slope.

The Indians, recovering from their first stunned surprise, came alive with blood-curdling howls. They blasted a rain of lead and arrows after the lone paleface, streaming down the slope after him.

Joey turned in his saddle twice to pick off Indians, as he galloped madly for the shelter of the station. He snatched a look ahead, saw the picket gate of the enclosed compound swung open and manned by a half-dozen men with guns, and urged Blaze to yet faster speed.

He swept through the gate, deafened by the roar of guns as he cleared out of range of the pursuing targets for the waiting defenders. Then the gates were slammed closed, and the men inside the station fortress swarmed up onto the fire step to rake the Indians with a withering fire.

The Modocs rode in a circle at a safe distance, trying a shot now and again, waving their stolen carbines in futile anger at their intended victims in the alerted station. Finally, they gathered up their handful of dead and faded into the hills.

A huge, red-whiskered man slapped

Joey heartily on the back.

"Well, now, youngster," he said, "you done us a good turn, and that's a fact! Where'd you come from?"

"Buckland's country," Joey said, letting his eyes stray from this man to the others. Travelers, driver, gun guard, assistant station agent. "Name of Joey Strait."

The agent stared at Joey, then critically at Blaze. "From Buckland's now! Where you headed, all alone, and with no gear?"

Joey swallowed heavily. "Uh, back to Buckland's country. Was lookin' for—uh—for hosses." He couldn't hold the agent's boring gaze for long. "Couldn't find 'em, though."

The big redhead nodded, his blue gaze never leaving Joey's face for a moment.

"Well, now, couldn't find 'em, eh? Must of figgered they'd strayed far. When'd you leave Buckland's?"

"Last night," Joey said, feeling the blood course to his cheeks. He knew he wasn't carrying this off well. But then it hadn't been planned this way, and Joey wasn't used to improvising, to making up things. "Left there yesterday noon."

The agent nodded. "Can't seem to make up your mind as to when you left. Even so, it's good ridin', and better *lookin'*, if you ask me—lookin' for hosses in the dark of night." He looked at Joey closely. "Wasn't California mustangs, was they?"

Joey started in surprise. "Mustangs? Uh, no. Why?"

"Seems like a feller that tried to lonehand it with a express rider got flushed out of his hidin' place, five-six days ago. Seems like he had a relay of hosses with him. To beat the rope, he sort of confessed they was a band of road agents had a neat deal rigged out to jump a gold stage, and make it back in record time so's none would suspect 'em, like. Seems a posse believed him enough to backtrack and pick up the other relay. But they strung 'em up anyhow, them two. Man named Black Sam, and one called Swede. Ever hear tell of 'em

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around Buckland's?"

Joey wet his lips, but couldn't speak. He knew dumbly how it was a bird could be hypnotized by a snake, for that was the way it was with him, now. All he could do was stare back speechlessly at this big station agent.

"Didn't see no other man out yonder where you come from, son?" the agent went on. "No. 'Cause Black Sam's story was they had a lookout posted to watch a station somewheres, and get word back when gold was loaded onto a stage. Wouldn't know about anything like that, now, would you?"

"I didn't see nobody," was the best Joey could manage.

The agent nodded again. "We-ll, son, you don't look like a liar. And you shoot right straight with your gun. Name's Strait, is it? Any kin to Big Bill Strait who got killed in these parts some fourteen years ago? Big Bill was a friend to me. Got drygulched, him and his missus. Seems to me he had a boy would be about your age."

Joey Strait nodded dumbly. "Yeah, he whispered. "Yeah, that's right. He —he was my father. Big Bill Strait."

"I'm Jeptha Morgan," the big redhead said warmly, sticking out a huge paw to engulf Joey's hand. "Easy, son, easy! No son of Big Bill's is under suspicion around here. What you do for a livin', son?"

"I—cook," Joey said, not much louder than his old whisper. "And ride. And—well, general handy things."

JEPTHA MORGAN grinned. "If you ride like you shoot, I think we got us just what we need. A man to carry the mail. A pony Express rider. One got killed by the Injuns last night, tryin' to get in here. We found his body, and the pouch broke open and mail scattered. Think you could handle the job?"

Joey blinked.

"You mean — carry — Gov'ment mail? Me? You mean, like Pony Bob Haslam and Jay G. Kelley and them?"

Morgan nodded slowly. "I mean like them. A man of trust who can be de-

pended on, so that people can get mail and business can be transacted and civilization brought to the Territory."

Joey shook his head in speechless wonder.

"I—I m-mean," he stammered, "you'd trust me? A stranger, like?"

"Some folks can't ever be trusted, son," Morgan said. "Others can be trusted now and then. Still others, once you trust 'em, you can trust 'em always. I think you can be trusted always, son. Like to make a try at it?"

Someone in the circle of surrounding men laughed at the expression of utter, dumfounded amazement that overspread Joey's pinched features. But the laugh was chopped short when the slender youngster teetered precariously on his booted feet, his jaws agape, and then fell flat on his face on the ground.

Jeptha Morgan gathered the wiry youngster up in his great arms and strode for the station building.

"Pore kid is plumb wore out," he muttered. "Half-starved lookin' and all, and that hard ride with the Injuns on his tail. Must be nigh two weeks since he had a decent meal. We will see—"

It was a week later that Joey turned his mustang off the trail through the fault of rocks, and picked a precarious way to the hidden shack that was Slade's hideout.

He hailed the deserted-looking house three times before Slade finally

[*Turn page*]

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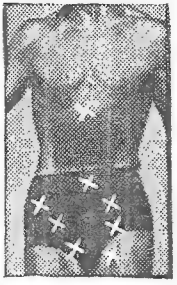

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showed, his eyes bleared above a stubble of heavy beard. Gentleman Jack and Deacon Tammis ranged out behind him. Irish Mike stuck his tousled head around the side of the shack.

"Reckoned it was only right to stop and tell you what I heard," Joey told his former leader. "Black Sammy and the Swede got caught up with and the relays was taken over. Me, I was shore enough chased by Injuns. Into Smith's Creek station. I ain't got the time, rightly, to stop. But figgered to let you know, and say good-by."

Slade cursed him viciously. "You blat-headed young fool!" the man roared. "What's the idea trackin' in here! Don't you know everybody knows your part in it? Don't you know Black Sammy spilled his craw before he done his death dance?"

Joey shook his head. "Why, no Slade," he said slowly. "Nothin' like that. Look, I'm ridin' the Express, now, and—"

Slade's eyes bulged. "What?" he whispered. "You're ridin' Pony Express? Carryin' dispatches and nobody knows how many greenbacks, and the like? You?"

"Yes sir," Joey said steadily. "My second ride. "I'm purposely ahead of schedule, so I could let you know."

Slade cut in on him again. "Good boy, good boy, Joey! I didn't know you had it in you. Why, the blasted fools, turnin' it over to you!" He came closer, his hand out. "The pouches, Joey! Give 'em over, boy!"

Joey backed his mount a pace. "Reckon we all make mistakes, Slade," he said quietly. "You're makin' one now. Like I said, I turned in, though I shouldn't have, to let you know the way it is. I'm ridin' on again, Slade. Now. And the pouches stays locked, and with me." His eyes sharpened when he saw the ugly look in Slade's face. "Don't argue, Slade. It's goin' to be the way I'm tellin' it. Don't try nothin'."

Slade glared, then his mouth writhed in a snarl.

"Why, you little renegade!" he flared. "Turn over them pouches. Turn 'em over, I say!"

He waited, his eyes reading Joey's. Then his hand clawed for his gun.

Joey's hand was a blur in the clear air, and his first slug caught Slade in the chest, a second bullet jolting the gun loose from the falling man's hand. Joey's gun arcked slightly, and Deacon Tammis buckled at the knees, his partly-drawn gun sliding from his lifeless grasp.

Joey backed his jittering horse carefully, his eyes cool on Gentleman Jack and Irish Mike.

"I—I had to do it," he said, gravely. "I had to. You saw that. I hope I don't have to any more?"

Irish Mike's eyes were as wide as his gaped jaws, and his hands as close to heaven as perhaps they would ever reach. Gentleman Jack disdained the

[*Turn page*]

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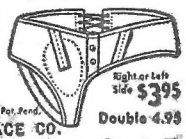

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hand-raising, but he was careful to bring his fingers slowly in that deliberate, at-attention salute he threw the lad.

"I never," the dark, saturnine man murmured, his eyes mixed with respect and slight mockery, "interfere with Federal men. Or other persons of importance. Ride proud, son. Ride proud."

"I'll have to report this," Joey said. "You'll—be leavin', you and Mike?"

Gentleman Jack nodded. "We had decided to go minin', Joey. Irish Mike and I. Slade's old claim. I used to think he was a smart hombre. But seein' how he has mishandled everything, I think maybe he has mishandled that old claim of his. We aim to find out, Mike and I. Don't worry, we'll be gone before any posse reaches us." He grinned swiftly. "We always have been. Ride proud, son!"

Joey holstered his gun and turned his mount back for the trail. He'd have to make tracks to hold to his schedule. Affairs of importance, like men of importance, must travel straight and fast. And Joey Strait was a man of importance in the West!

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

RANGER JIM HATFIELD

IN

THE PECOS BARRICADE

By JACKSON COLE

A FRANK STATEMENT ON A "DELICATE" SUBJECT: CONSTIPATION

FOREWORD: *This is an outspoken attempt to discuss, with complete frankness, a condition that has become one of the world's most widespread human maladies...constipation. A delicate subject at best, it has been under medical and scientific scrutiny for years. We believe we owe it to those who suffer from it, to publish these pertinent facts.*

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Actually, there are several types of constipation. Two basic types are common:

1. The organic type, requiring medical care.
2. The "functional" type, requiring wise mechanical correction.

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The end of each day leaves us so tense, so nervously exhausted, that every muscle feels tight—***INCLUDING THE INTESTINAL MUSCLES. IN FACT, IT HAS BEEN SAID, THE WHOLE HUMAN DIGESTIVE SYSTEM CAN BE ALMOST LITERALLY "TIED IN A KNOT" BY SHEER NERVOUS TENSION.***

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